

Island Connections: Icelandic Spatiality in the Wake of Worldly Linkages

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Abstract: The notions and materiality of connections, through electronic networks as well as modes of mobility, play an ever-increasing role in how we define, understand, engage and experience the world we live in and the islands we live on. This article presents an account of Icelandic encounters with technologies of telecommunication and explores how electronic connections have participated in formulating a particularly connected, island spatiality. It is argued that an island can be regarded as a kind of *connected* laboratory suitable for studying how associations form around technologies of connections, which can be traced through various actors. For this purpose, the historical genealogy of connections and telecommunication in Iceland is analyzed, as well as more contemporary ideas and representations of mobile phone usage and network connectivity. It is maintained that connections have fundamentally altered the spatiality as well as representations of Iceland. While still an island in a geographical sense, and in that manner remote and isolated, the social space of the island now denies such connotations in many respects, valorizing the connectivity of Iceland and its people.

Keywords: Iceland, islands, connections, mobility, telecommunication, mobile phones, modernity, globalization

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Introduction

It is important to recognize that islands and continents are but names we give to different parts of one interconnected world. Islands and mainland derive their meaning from their relationship to one another, a relationship that has changed dramatically over time (Gillis, 2004: 3).

The global is local; the local is global; presence can be absence; and the absent present. The implication is that we should be putting the oppositions implied in such pairs behind us. It is also that we should be looking at processes. How are localizations produced? How are scale effects created? How are things made absent or present? These pressing questions are made all the more urgent by the complexities which follow the proliferation of communication and transportation technologies (Callon & Law, 2004: 3).

"...there are no remote volcanoes", observed a research geophysicist in a news account amidst the Icelandic volcanic eruptions in Eyjafjallajökull during 2010 (EUMETSAT,

2010). The fact that a volcano on an island, which is generally considered by the rest of the world to be remote and isolated, could halt flight mobility around the world for weeks came as a shock to many. But the notion of remoteness is peculiar and subject to ever changing conceptions and relationality. The previously considered remote volcano was no longer remote; its impact, however, made places close by seem remote, as people were stranded for days, or had to resort to desperate measures and innovation in transportation instead of previously more straightforward itineraries. The accounts of the once remote volcano, on the remote volcano island, making its presence and proximity in the world known, dominated major news headlines for weeks, as the volcanic ash traveled the skies and brought so much of world mobility to a halt. But the volcanic eruption was the second major event in a short time which brought the island nation of Iceland to the international news headlines. For many, the eruptions were emblematic of a previous turn of events.

Since October 2008, Iceland had frequently made international news headlines. With the collapse of the banking sector and subsequent near collapse of the economy, the inhabitants of this small island have found themselves in a serious state of crisis and confusion. From the turn of the 21st century, Icelandic bankers and businessmen had vigorously participated in international business, borrowing, lending, investing and acquiring firms and real estate around the world. These transactions were widely celebrated in Iceland, and they were seen to signify tremendous capabilities and vigour, analogies of the Viking age were even evoked. The once remote Icelanders positioned themselves at the centre of international business, defying any previous conceptions of geographical barriers and isolation. While volcanic activities or the economic crisis of Iceland are not the main topic of this article, they serve as an interesting and representative prelude. The actual Vikings needed to make physical appearances on foreign shores for their dealings; but, a large part of the business which now has landed Iceland in a deep recession was conducted through electronic networks and devices. The capabilities of venturing islanders to instantly connect to people and places elsewhere, access global networks of information, and finalize transactions, were seemingly boundless. Similarly, every action of the volcano was broadcasted in real-time around the world, bringing the remote island into the midst of events on a global stage, halting world mobility.

The notions and materiality of connections, through electronic networks as well as modes of mobility, play an ever-increasing role in how we define, understand, engage and experience the world we live in and the islands we live on. As Massey has argued, “spaces and places are altered in their physicality and in their meaning through embeddedness in networks of communication” (Massey, 2005: 96). While it is true that communities and ‘islands’ of the world have always been connected in one way or another (Gillis, 2004; Tsing, 2005), the connecting powers presently experienced are truly unparalleled. In Iceland, as elsewhere in the world, there is a fervent discourse that ties information and communication technologies and their connecting powers with notions of capitalism and modernity, progress, efficiency, mobility, globalization and the compression of time and space. Around the globe, these connections are seen as vital for the maintenance and advancement of the world visions by which our lives

have become organized. Islands, surrounded by sea, face a particular challenge within these visions of globalization and seek various means of connectivity to enable their participation and existence within the emerging world of connectivities. It is a view commonly encountered that telecommunication has made a fundamental difference for small islands in this regard and has, for instance, “enabled them to join the rest of the world, to move away from the periphery and into the thick of things” (Frendo, 1999: 2). Through telecommunication networks, islands are effectively brought into the “space of flows”, enabling islanders “simultaneous social interaction at a distance by networked communication.” (Castells *et al.*, 2006: 171).

The article draws on materials from four years of multi-sited ethnographic doctoral research in anthropology. The methodological compounds I employed for the task can well be seen, following Hess (1992: 16), as a “multimethod cultural critique” combining ethnographic fieldwork in Iceland with historical, comparative, and textual methods of various kinds. A fundamental tenet in the methodology was to trace connections and analyze processes in which connections and associations that constitute objects and subjects are made. As Latour maintains: “follow the connections, ‘follow the actors themselves’” (Latour, 2005: 179). I approach ethnography as an open-ended research method ideal for chasing connections. In this vein, Gusterson (1997: 116) has argued that contemporary ethnography should emphasize “polymorphous engagements”. Following Gusterson, this polymorphism involves collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways, interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, doing fieldwork by telephone and e-mail, attending to popular culture, conducting formal interviews, and reading newspapers and official documents. In this manner, one can posit ethnography as a methodological assemblage of techniques of collecting data, understood in a broad sense, from a variety of sources, far and near. This is for me how ethnography, as Strathern (2002: 309) maintains, “throws up the unplanned, the counter-intuitive, the unpredictable”. While I summoned a number of data gathering methods for the task, a primary source of data and insights came from interviews: a total of 40 persons were interviewed. These were defined as key respondents because they had some form of involvement in the introduction and formulation of telecommunication and mobile communication technologies in Iceland. As such, they were chosen by purposive sampling in light of the knowledge and views they were presumed to possess (Bernard, 2005).

This article will first explore the notion of the island as a connected laboratory and then move on to the recent historical genealogy of connections and telecommunication in Iceland in order to establish the cultural grounding of these significant concepts for a ‘remote’ and ‘isolated’ island. I will then build on more contemporary ideas and representations of mobile phone usage and network connectivity as a particular case to explore the role that electronic connectivity has assumed in the spatiality of modern Iceland and its worldly outlooks. Lastly, I will explore the implications my findings may have for the study of islands.

The Island as a Connected Laboratory

There are strong and deep rooted notions of connectedness and mobilities in contemporary representations of the current state of the world; that, in fact, “nowhere can be an island (Sheller & Urry, 2006: 209). It is commonplace, both in popular discourse and academic writing, to describe the world we live in as interconnected, characterized by global flows of capital, technology, images, media, people, and so forth (*e.g.* Appadurai, 1996; Inda & Rosado, 2002). Tsing (2000: 331), for instance points out that, to invoke the term ‘global’, is to draw attention to the speed and density of interconnections among people and places. Amin (2002) argues that globalization can be seen to be fundamentally about the spatiality of contemporary social organizations and the meanings of place and space associated with intensified world level forces and raised global connectivity. It follows that the notion of globalization, how places and people become connected, can partly be traced through its interconnections; that is, through local projects of connections, fixed infrastructure, national policies, accounts and representations of how a locale becomes implicated in something called the ‘global’. For instance, how an island becomes a part of the “network society” (Castells, 1996) through technologies of telecommunication. Latour (2005: 176) has maintained that “the global are other ‘local’ places connected to many others through some medium”.

Admittedly, my view on islands, and islandness, is thoroughly inspired by Actor Network Theory. Essentially, I see islands and islanders as made and re-made from associations and linkages with other actors far and near. An actor, such as a bridge or submarine cable with connecting powers, emerges prominently in reshaping an island. Fundamentally, islands can be regarded as relational assemblies. It follows that in an exploration of island connections, there is no fixed place called an island. The island and the islanders become something and someone else through the associations with technologies of telecommunication (Latour, 1999; Horst & Miller, 2006).

The approach I intend to apply follows a prominent angle in island studies, namely a ‘spatial laboratory’ approach (King, 2009: 57). But, contrary to common fallacies within this approach, as noted by King (*ibid.*) my intention is not to regard the island as a closed system or a miniature replica of some kind, but as a connected entity. I posit Iceland as an interesting location for an inquiry of this kind. Because of its relative isolation in geographic terms, and previously in more absolute terms, Iceland, like various other islands, has often been likened to a natural isolated island-laboratory, for example in anthropological studies and genetic research (*e.g.* Pálsson & Durrenberger, 1996; Pálsson, 2007). At the same time, the notion of Iceland as an isolated laboratory has been heavily contested and rejected as Pálsson and Durrenberger (1996) point out, and is by now being replaced with a notion of Iceland as entangled in a stream of global flow of cultural constructs. As Tsing (2005: 2) argues:

“It has become increasingly clear that all human cultures are shaped and transformed in long histories of regional-to-global networks of power, trade, and meaning”.

Island cultures are no exception in this regard. Thus, rather than building on islands as ‘isolated laboratories’, I propose to position them as *connected* laboratories, uniquely and strategically situated to study an unfolding ‘world of connections’ (The Economist, 2007). Sentiments and representations of isolation, remoteness and inaccessibility in various forms, provide for interesting juxtapositions when studying formations of a new spatiality which largely rests upon associations with connections and mobility.

I am, however, acutely aware that linking islands with the notion of a laboratory is equivocal. As Gillis has pointed out, *islands* have served as a kind of a Western “master metaphor”, and been evoked to represent a variety of things through the centuries (2004: 3). I nonetheless contend that the island imagination can be employed as a creative space in a voyage through worldly connections as it forwards the role electronic connections currently assume in making and re-making places (Callon & Law, 2004: 4). Because of their geographic location and relative isolation, I therefore contend that islands can be regarded as a kind of laboratory suitable for studying how associations form around technologies of connections, as they can be traced, firstly from a perceived mode of isolation, and subsequently through various actors, including submarine cables, telegraphs, telephone lines, mobile phones, organizations, people and representations of various kinds.

I believe that this line of inquiry provides an interesting perspective on how spatial identities are relationally constructed (Massey 2004), as well as how islands are conceptualized and spatially positioned within an interconnected world. Islands are in fact ever changing relational spatial identities and can be seen as “discursively and imaginatively materialized and enacted” through various people and practices (Raffles, 1999: 324). It follows that spatial identities need to be treated as produced scales, not as ontological entities (Hastrup, 1995; Tsing, 2000). In this way, an island, as a place, can be ‘performed’ on a global stage (Sheller & Urry, 2004) as ‘remote’ or as ‘connected’ depending on the audience and the objectives of the performance. Following Sheller & Urry (*ibid.*), islands are, like other places, about relationships and the placing of peoples, materials and images, situated within networks of human and non-human agents. From an island perspective, my inquiry follows Baldacchino (2008: 47), and explores island routes as well as boundaries, recognizing the need of islanders to develop ‘glocal’ identities and to invest in connectivities. Along those lines, let us travel back 100 years or so and ethnographically greet the submarine cable as it sets land on the east coast of Iceland, in the fall of 1906.

Iceland meets connections and mobility

In the year 1906, Iceland established a telephone connection to the external world. Centuries of isolation had been broken and the worldview changed. Telephone connection abroad—even though it consisted only of the telegraph for the first 29 years—had tremendous impact on commerce, media, human communication and culture (Jónsdóttir & Johnson, 2006: back cover, translation by the author).

The above is the introduction to the official history of telecommunications in Iceland, commemorating the 100th anniversary of Iceland's connection to the world via the submarine cable. This is a representation of an event, a connection, and its subsequent implications for life on a remote island in the northern Atlantic. Interestingly, this account could just as well be depicting any modern day innovation in telecommunication, such as the internet, or mobile phone connections. New technologies are indeed commonly seen as harbingers of change in media and everyday discourse. By starting at this juncture in the history of connections in Iceland, I wish to bring to light the central role connections assume in the account and production of modern Iceland. On a more general note, I wish to treat connections as an abstract global claim to be interrogated. Claims of connected individuals in an interconnected world are neither true nor false, but can be interrogated through the modalities of electronic connections as "sticky engagements", as Tsing (2005) proposes, on a North Atlantic island. If we approach globalization as a term that describes and makes sense of a world that has become increasingly connected in myriad ways, then the process of how places and people become connected can partly be traced through its interconnecting junctures: that is, through local projects of connections, accounts and representations of how a locale becomes implicated in, and with, other places and spaces.

Iceland has generally been considered to be a remote and isolated island, at least in a geographical sense. These are common notions, even today, to say nothing of two hundred years ago. For instance, in 1776, King Christian VII ordained that postal connection would be established between Iceland and Denmark, which he felt was somewhat disconnected with the world. Two years later, these postal connections commenced once a year (Þjóðskjalasafn, 2006). Despite this early initiative by the colonial masters, Iceland was nonetheless lacking in outside connections. As an example, when King Fridrik VI passed away on 3rd December 1839, news of his death only reached Iceland with the spring ship the following year. Icelanders had celebrated his birthday on 28th January 1840, a full seven weeks after he was buried (Jónsdóttir & Johnson, 2006: 54-55).

In 1906, Iceland eventually gets connected to Scotland by a submarine cable. Previously, the Marconi Company had installed a one-way wireless telegraph connection to Reykjavík, and debates had subsequently entered into Icelandic politics on which was the superior mode of connection; cable or wireless. Officially, the telecommunication history starts with the submarine cable and the laying of telephone lines across the country, from Seyðisfjörður in the East, to Reykjavík, in the Southwest, which subsequently became the foundation for telephone connections within the country. Later on, however, wireless connections were to gather increasing momentum. Hannes Hafstein, the Minister of Iceland, in charge of affairs in this Danish colony, was a protagonist in getting this connection established, and politics are seen to have played an important role. Interestingly, while there seems to have been a strong political will to connect Iceland, Jónsdóttir and Johnson (2006: 11) note in their historical account that the public did not have great expectations regarding the arrival

of the telephone, as these initial connections were tailored to the needs of the Danish colonial rulers rather than in their potential use by the general public in Iceland.

The close links with Denmark reportedly had a bearing when an agreement to establish the connection was made with a Danish company, the *Great Nordic Telegraph Company* (Jónsdóttir & Johnson, 2006). Let us also keep in mind that, for the Nordic countries to which Icelanders most commonly measure themselves (Norway and Denmark), this development had started fifty years earlier. There had been previous plans to connect Iceland as part of a trans-Atlantic connection, which Icelanders were reportedly excited about at the time. However, those cables ended up being laid south of Iceland, thus leaving the country unconnected for decades to come. As the cables improved in quality and got stronger and better shielded, it proved unnecessary to use Iceland as a point of connection in the trans-Atlantic connection route (Björnsson, 1987).

The 19th century, a century without electronic connections, is often depicted as a rather bleak and stagnant time in Iceland's history. Chronicling telecommunications in Iceland, Ólafur Björnsson contextualizes the previous lack of connections:

It can be stated that a primary hindrance to normal progress in Iceland was the almost complete lack of connection with the outside world, apart from sailings to and from the country during the summer months.

On several occasions in the past centuries, Icelanders had been battling against unfavourable winds, but the 19th century moved us further astray from other nations than any other century. This was not due to relapse here (some progress did occur, particularly during the liberation years 1854 and 1874); but rather due to great and rapid progress abroad. Abroad, steamships replaced sails, steam rails replaced horse wagons, and telegraphs and telephones stimulated all commerce and business (Björnsson, 1987: 265, translation by the author).

Historical accounts and the rhetoric of telecommunication draw strongly upon notions of the island's remoteness and isolation. The country at this time is depicted in general and historical accounts as having been in a state of stagnation; a sedentary farm society (e.g. Magnússon, 2004). The analogy of movement is important in two ways: people were sedentary, and the society was stagnated. Given that there was no mobility and no connections, the story goes, there was no progress. The Icelandic word "*kyrrstaða*", or standstill, is used in both instances. Lack of connection at this time is seen to hinder progress and development relative to what had started in nearby countries. The submarine cable is an example of an artifact that is represented as overcoming isolation (Síminn, no date), thus enabling movement and progress. Connections produce new connected spaces, rendering physical distances differently significant: they bring islands into the 'space of flows' (Castells *et al.*, 2006), enabling virtual mobility and connectivity outside a previously confined space. As Cresswell has pointed out, the concept of mobility has increasingly been understood as a positive valuation, deployed

in relation to progress, freedom and change. In this manner, mobility and connections are seen to demarcate “a break from more confined spaces and times” (Cresswell, 2006: 43). Thus, notions of connectivity and mobility assume status in historical accounts as key actors in forming a new kind of Iceland, linking the island with the rest of world, and extending its confined space.

Connections: Foundations of Modernity

The beginning of the 20th century in Iceland marked the centennial anniversary of the introduction to the country of several technological systems and artifacts. The history of modernity in Iceland is generally seen to start at the turn of the 20th century, for example as coined by a historian as a time when “the foundations were laid for modern Icelandic society” (Magnússon, 2004: para 1, translation by the author). The diffusion of technologies to various spheres of society is largely seen to lay the foundation for modernity in Iceland. Motorization of the fishing fleet starts in 1904, which is often seen as the “Icelandic Industrial Revolution” (Magnússon, 2004). Catch sizes increased as the motorized fishing fleet reached new fishing grounds. This further laid the foundation for settlements to form along the coastline. The generation of electricity also started in 1904, later to become a major factor in Icelandic social, economic and cultural life. Skúli Sigurdsson (1994: 2) points out that the story of electrification in Iceland is “filled with metaphors of progress and illumination”. Later on, it would continue to be central in metaphors of progress but in a different and more contested manner, as people grappled with the ideologies of the utilization of nature in electrical production and national and regional economic development related to industrialization and aluminum production. Throughout the century, various new forms of technologies and mobilities emerged. Harbors were built in emerging seaside villages around the country, greatly enhancing connections between places located along the coast. Mobility was further enhanced with new roads and bridges, enabling the travel of horse wagons, as well as new modes of transport, including the automobile and airline connectivity. And, as noted above, the submarine cable connected Iceland to the rest of the world in 1906; telephone connection within the country became gradually established, although not completed until around 1960 (Síminn, no date).

Interestingly, parallels are often offered between road systems and systems of telecommunication, drawing strongly upon an analogy of movement and connectivity. Modern day telecom networks are officially denoted as the road systems for “information networks” (e.g. Samgönguráðuneytið, 2005). The term “information highway” is now commonly used. Anatomical analogies are also drawn with human physiology and with road systems as they relate to movement and sustaining life:

The road system is sometimes said to be like the human body’s vascular system which maintains its function by securing bloodstream to the various parts of the body. By the same token, a solid road system and good transportation are the prerequisite for daily life and economy to grow and prosper in urban and rural areas (Vegagerðin, 2006: para 3, translation by the author).

Having worked in telecommunication for over 40 years, one of my respondents draws upon the analogy, seeing the work of installing the telecommunication networks as laying the foundations for society, just like building roads. Indeed, where would we be if you did not have roads? Where would we be without a telecommunication network? One could further the analogy and ask, where would you be without a vascular system? The metaphor is vivid and powerful and brings to light how interwoven the idea of connections and movement has become to human societies. In this context, telecommunication is frequently conveyed as a life vein (*lifæð*) for the island society, connections have become a life-sustaining project for the islanders. This is vividly illustrated in the naming of two official publications: *Life Vein to the World* (Póst og símamálastofnun 1986), and *Life Vein of a Country and its People* (Samgönguráðuneytið, 1991). When reviewing the history of telecommunication, on the 90th anniversary of the submarine cable in 1996, the former director of Iceland Post and Telecom commented on the importance of telecommunication at the event in an interview in Morgunblaðið, a daily newspaper:

Yes, this is the life vein (*lifæð*) for all Icelanders. Telecommunications are the prerequisites for almost every aspect of culture and business and matters greatly in communication between people. They touch the lives of everyone. Our role is to connect, both companies and individuals anywhere in the world (Morgunblaðið, Sept. 29th 1996, translation by the author).

Throughout the last century, various technologies of telecommunication were installed and connections established around the country, connecting regions, houses and farms, computers, and eventually individuals far and near. People's access to these technologies became more widespread, first through government rationing as a part of establishing infrastructures, and subsequent to trade liberalization with the provisioning of the "free market". The importance of connections grew as they became associated with further spheres of human life. A hundred years after installing the submarine cable, the project of connections is still ongoing and connections have come to play a big part in forming perceptions of the Icelandic nation and how Icelanders perceive their spatiality and opportunities in the world, as is nicely illustrated in a special report of telecommunication from 1995:

Breaking the Restraints of Distance

Few people doubt that it will be of central importance for the competitiveness of Iceland and our place in international markets, and standards of life in this country in the coming years, whether and subsequently how we manage to harvest the benefits of the revolutions in telecommunication (Morgunblaðið, Nov. 26th 1995, translation by the author).

In this account, the modern-day living conditions in Iceland are seen to depend on how and by what means Icelanders appropriate the revolutions in telecommunication. Less than ten years later, a 2005 policy document from the Icelandic Ministry of Transport

and Communication, distributed to every home in Iceland, in relation to the official Telecommunication Policy 2005–2010 announces: *Iceland constantly connected* “*Ísland altengt*” (Samgönguráðuneytið, 2006a). The policy postulates equal access to telecommunication and high-speed internet connections as being of central importance for economic development and progress in rural and urban contexts in Iceland:

The aim is to lay the foundations for the progress of Icelandic society by offering the best, most economical, and secure electronic communication, by utilizing telecommunication and information technologies.
(Samgönguráðuneytið, 2005: 8, translation by the author).

Telecommunications have certainly come to the forefront of human life. From the strong sense and reliance upon interconnectedness stems the metaphor of the “life vein”: electronic modes of communication have become established as the life veins of society. The metaphor forwards an important tale and brings to light the battle with remoteness and world participation through projects of connectivity and mobility and demonstrating how telecommunications are valorized in an island society. Moreover, the notion of connecting a remote place to the rest of world, by “breaking the restraints of distance” and thus compressing space, is commonly depicted as vital. This perspective is further illustrated by the following account from an *Economic Intelligence Unit* report on transport and communication in Iceland:

As a remote island, Iceland has had much to gain from rapid developments in the telecommunications sector. The dominant company in the telecoms market is the state-owned Telecom Iceland. Its telephone network is both modern and fully digitized, with satellite-earth stations, optical fibre cables and an extensive mobile phone system. With 75% of the entire population registered as mobile phone users at the end of 2000, Iceland has the world's highest rate of mobile phones per head (EIU ViewsWire, 22nd April 2003).

In depicting modern Iceland, telecommunication, digitalization, satellite earth stations, optical fibre cables, and mobile phones are brought into play. Connections are seen as one of the fundamental forms of Iceland’s participation in a society of nations, involvement in modernity, and as prerequisite for economic development. While remote, electronic connections have changed the perception of distances and isolation, they have assisted in producing new spatialities and are subsequently regarded as having increased Iceland’s opportunity for global participation and action.

The submarine cable and subsequently the telegraph did provide a new type of connection which enabled new modes of action for Icelanders: for example, in communication, business and media. Interestingly enough, the bulk of the telecommunication traffic still goes through a submarine cable to Scotland. Only a few years ago, the connection was interrupted several times: at one time, rats in Scotland had chewed the cable apart (Samgönguráðuneytið, 2006b); and, in another instance, Scottish farmers improving their fences were apparently at fault, as reported in the Icelandic media (Vísir, 2008). In general discourse, grave concerns were raised about

the country's reliance on the cable. But the severing of the cable illustrates how a breakdown renders visible an otherwise automatic and autonomous object. The submarine cable becomes full of "frantically moving humans with heavy equipment" (Latour, 2005: 81), attempting to reinstate the connection and get Iceland back in touch with the world. Iceland now has two submarine cables with the aim to secure their island's "connection" with the outside world; but breakdowns continue to interrupt the 'seamless' flow of information to and from the country. These events bring clearly to light the reliance a modern society, and an island in particular, has on electronic connections as well as, just as vitally, the fragile materiality of these connections.

Connections and mobilities certainly emerge as two important actors in historical accounts of the foundations of modernity in 20th century Iceland. Iceland missed out on the rapid social changes concomitant to the industrial revolution at the end of the 18th century elsewhere in Europe. When Icelanders look back two hundred years, an image of turf farms, stagnation and sedentary society confronts them. In fact, the author of a newly published history book, *Chronicles of 19th Century Iceland* (Bjarnason, 2006), used the words misery, destitution, stagnation and conservatism to describe the period in a TV interview. At the end of the 19th century, Iceland began to be modernized, mobilized and connected. The beginning of the 20th century is seen as the time when Icelanders become proud of their history again, the protagonists who led the independence and modernization of the country and those who introduced the new technologies. In fundamental ways, the past century is labeled as a period of progress with increased standards of living. At the outset, we have Iceland as an unconnected, backward and stagnant imagination, remote and insular. At the beginning of the 21st century, in sharp contrast, an image is conveyed of the country as constantly connected, forward, progressive and boasting a mobile imagination, ever present in a globalized world: always-on.

Mobile Connections and Icelandic Techno-nationalism

At the end of the 20th Century, roughly a hundred years after the submarine cable reached shore, another communication device set foot on the island: the mobile (or cell) phone. The new device was embraced by Icelanders and soon became omnipresent while constant connectivity and ubiquitous electronic networks assumed status as prominent symbols of a modern and efficient way of life. Emblematic of this state of affairs during the first years of the new century were the bankers who constantly utilized their mobile communication devices at all times and places, responding to phone calls and e-mails from far and near. They had to be constantly connected, as lack of connection meant missed opportunities in the fast moving world of capitalism and global business. While the banks' headquarters were located on an island, global communication systems enabled their effective participation and actions over great distances.

Mobile phones and networks serve as effective artifacts to explore in more detail how Icelanders have drawn upon modern communication technologies and connecting powers in building accounts of a contemporary identity and conceivably escaping their

islandness. Within these accounts, a certain element of a techno-nationalist sentiment is evident, as the success of the nation is seen as dependent on how well the country innovates, diffuses technologies, and is positioned to make good use of communication technologies (Edgerton 2007). We will start with a quote from *The Financial Times*:

“The land of fire and ice is one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. Two out of three homes in Iceland have internet access and the country also has the highest penetration of mobile phone users” (Cole, 2000: 18).

The above statement represents an account Icelanders like to hear reported: an image they like to convey to themselves and the world beyond. It is the image of a modern and connected Iceland. These stories are well received by Icelanders and represent a good example of the way Icelanders partly see and define the substance of their lifeworlds through the eyes of others (Hastrup, 1998). Foreign accounts celebrating Iceland’s technological proficiency and advancements certainly touch a chord with national pride. While not being producers of communication and information technologies, Icelanders like to be conceived as early adopters and ardent users of these technologies. This is frequently reported in various forums as it pertains to mobile penetration and Internet usage. A speech by a Member of Parliament in relation to a new telecommunication policy serves as a vivid example:

“Of course, we will not be able to connect every person at every farm in all instances, but we can carry our head high, and we will excel other countries in access to high speed connection and service for GSM users, and we will have the world’s highest scores in this as we have in so many other aspects” (Siv Friðleifsdóttir, MP for the Progressive Party, Parliamentary speech 20th Oct. 2005, translation by the author).

At the start of the 21st century, it seemingly became a matter of national pride in Iceland to be associated with adopting new technologies. A culture of high-tech gadgets was celebrated as positioning Icelanders on the frontiers in the world of global connections. A notion commonly referred to in various satirical and serious accounts is the ‘fact’ that Iceland is the per capita world champion of various things. This is evident in the media, which regularly reports Iceland’s relative status on using the internet, broadband, and mobile phones, among others. Consider for instance this news headline from the cover of *Morgunblaðið*:

Mobile Phone Ownership: Iceland Threatens the Norwegian World Record
(*Morgunblaðið*, 10th July 1988, translation by the author).

The same tendency is apparent in 2000:

Icelanders are World Champions in Mobile Phone Usage

About 210,000 mobile phones are now in use in this country. *Morgunblaðið* reported yesterday that mobile phone ownership [per capita] in Iceland now

exceeds Finland, which had remained the world leader in previous years. Now, on a per capita basis, mobile phone users in Iceland are believed to be higher than in any other nation (Morgunblaðið, 23rd Nov. 2000, translation by the author).

And yet again, in 2007, a newspaper account reports the findings of an OECD report:

Icelanders are one of most technologically advanced nations in the world and are at the frontier of practically all domains of telecommunication (Blaðið, 9th August 2007, translation by the author).

The efforts of the country in living up to the notion of being technologically advanced are in many ways illustrated in this comment from one respondent, relating to the early introduction of GSM in Iceland, which was at first seen to be a few years behind the other Nordic countries:

We were clearly behind the Nordic countries at this time. That does not happen often with Icelanders, that they become laggards in the introduction of new technologies, but at this time we were. But one and a half years later, we had reached the other Nordic countries, and subsequently bypassed them.

The impression of Icelanders as being quick to adopt new technologies came into view in many interviews with my respondents during my research. While some accepted the idea of Iceland being in the frontline of new technologies, others rejected it as myth, stating that Icelanders could perhaps best be seen as early adopters of electronic gadgets. But could the myth of the technologically-savvy Icelanders have something to do with a sense of a geographically remote and isolated island, where only a few decades ago technologies somehow broke the isolation and enabled it to participate in the Western modernist project? Communication technologies serve as an effective tool to enable the islanders to construct narratives of a modern and progressive nation. Technologies and their usage, connecting Icelanders to the world beyond, have become an integral part of Icelandic national identity positioned as a progressive modern society in the international society of nations. If people do not adapt to and use various information and communication technologies, the view is often expressed that the persons involved are not participating in 'modernity'. They belong to some past primeval times. I believe that the associations surrounding mobile phones came to display this sentiment at the turn of the century. A lack of mobile connection was a lack of a modern connection and anyone resisting constant connectivity was considered a hermit. Barker (2005) has delineated a similar image from another island community, in his study of Indonesian satellite projects, which he argues drew their power from their capacity to mediate a culturally diverse, traditional, and underdeveloped past with a modern, nationally unified and developed future. Barker (*ibid.*: 710) notes that these projects announced: "We Indonesians have become modern; we are no longer traditional or underdeveloped". In the same vein, a saturation of high speed mobile and internet connections in Iceland, and Icelanders' seeming ability to integrate them

seamlessly with their daily lives, creates a particular spatial representation as it proclaims: “We Icelanders (islanders) are no longer remote, immobile, stagnant: we are connected, mobile and progressive and part of a globalized economy.”

The account of the technologically advanced Icelanders can well be regarded as one of the folk theories of how Icelanders continue to modernize themselves and live up to comparison with neighbouring countries. As Edgerton (2007) argues, techno-nationalism denotes certain ideologies rather than actual reality. These tales can effectively be seen as rhetorical tools that produce and create narratives of the past, present and future of the country. As such, mobile and other electronic connections have come to play a part in a national identity of a forward-looking, progressive and modern society. Matsuda (2005) has argued that the celebration of *keitas* (mobile phones) in Japan arises from a techno-nationalist sentiment typical of postwar Japan. In a similar vein, connections, most recently mobile ones, have come to be celebrated by Icelanders. They have become emblematic, representing our worldly linkages; it is a form of what David Hess (1997) has called a ‘technototem’ in the sense that being associated with connections is of utmost importance for Icelanders and provides a certain distinctiveness. Hastrup (1998) has emphasized how history and past times have played a central role in forming what she terms ‘Icelandicness’; but she notes that, with more market integration in the world economy and emphasis on modernity, the core of Icelandicness seems to be increasingly cast in terms of the frontier. Thus technologies, connections and mobility now play a vital part in reformulating this ‘Icelandicness’. Icelanders’ celebration of internet and mobile connections represents a desire for a modern identity in a globalized world; electronic connections help the previously isolated islanders to build a techno-nationalistic account of the country as a modern and connected island nation in an interconnected world.

Miller (1998: 19) points out that it is one of the struggles of modern life to retain both a sense of authentic locality and yet also laying claim to cosmopolitanism. While I have emphasized the values Icelanders place on connectedness, Icelanders also ‘perform’ other types of spatial identities and emphasize more deep-rooted cultural values. This is clearly demonstrated in debates about politics and accession to the European Union, agriculture, marketing of tourism, genetic research, and language and culture policies. Amidst the worldly linkages and connections, Icelanders certainly have to ‘perform’ a particular island distinctiveness. Gillis captures this nicely when he states:

“Today’s Icelanders play with the world’s view of them as remote and exotic, while maintaining a view of themselves as being at the very centre of the world” (Gillis, 2004: 119).

Icelanders clearly lay claim to dual spatial identities as Gillis describes. With technologies of communication they have certainly built a view of themselves as being at the very centre of the world. Emblematic of this dualism is how the country will essentially grapple with political integration subsequent with potential EU accession. To what extent Icelanders will be able to control this process is a worry for many, as a large portion of the islanders view it as an island merging into the mainland, thereby

forcing them to forego their spatial island identity. Unlike the shifting spatial identities enabled by electronic connections, the meanings and functions of which can be continuously shaped, further political integration is seen as positioning and locking the country in more absolute terms in a relationship with more powerful entities which might threaten some aspects of its independence, culture and uniqueness as an island.

Conclusions: Re-making an Island

A conception of Iceland as a connected laboratory was introduced in this article: an exploration of how an island establishes connections and is made and re-made through its connections to other places. In this sense, an island imagination (Gillis, 2004) was forwarded as a creative space in the voyage through connectivity. The title of the article, *Island Connections*, is meant to encapsulate certain juxtapositions from the typical connotations islands have encompassed as geographical phenomena, as somewhat isolated and apart from wholes. In this manner, I attempt to build upon and propel the island as a site of innovative conceptualization in real as well as virtual human enterprise (Baldacchino, 2006). The idea that electronic connections play a role in island locality and spatiality is highly relevant and forwards the importance of electronic connections, in mobilizing actors and making and re-making places (Callon & Law, 2004: 4). Through various telecommunication technologies and means of virtual and real mobility, islands around the world have now been connected in myriad and generic ways; and so have the islanders.

Connections, networks and communicative devices certainly play a part in constructing the idea of the 'modern' society, the 'modern' world, and the 'modern' individual. They are valorized as the paths to progress and economic development of society. Following Hakken (1999), who at the turn of the new century saw computing as a central 'myth' or story of the times, I contend that the material forwarded in this article brings connectivity to the pedestal as a central myth or story. World connectivity permeates narratives of how the world is, how it could be, and how we can conduct our lives. Around the world, societies and individuals embrace new technologies of connections with vigour. In Iceland, telecommunication and most recently mobile phones and networks have fostered a strong sentiment of connectedness and I would postulate that these findings carry implications for the conceptualization of islands on a general note. In a world where technologies are perceived to be evolving at a fast pace, connecting the world with an ever increasing amount of strategic opportunities in the global economy, islands without connections run the risk of being left behind in this new world order. Failure to produce effects of compressed time and space through the medium of telecommunication, represents for islands, and islanders, a missed chance to escape their geographical confines and participate in this new world order. To build on Fabian's (2002) notion, those whose time and space has not been compressed are perceived to live in a "time of the Other"; represented as stagnant and underdeveloped, remote and faraway. The alteration of island spatiality and temporality is a project that islands must participate in to create and live up to the world of globalization. Through materialization in various forms, connectivity and mobility have certainly emerged as one of the meta-narratives of a globalized modernity (Englund & Leach, 2000) to

which islands and islanders strive to belong. In this instance, we are reminded of the spatial power relations behind terms such as ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ (Escobar, 1995). Within these ‘geopolitics’ islands attempt to move away from a powerless periphery towards a powerful centre. Iceland, and islands in general, effectively attempt to amplify their power relations by reconfiguring their spatiality through time-space compressions.

Paying attention to the processes through which islands assume electronic connectivity can inform our understanding of the emerging world of constant connection. On a general note, it could easily be stated that the various connections shorten the telecommunicative distance to the mainlands; what these connections achieve is bringing islanders into the “network society” (Castells, 1996). Surely they will give rise to new meanings of time and space on any island, enabling islanders to act in distant places, real and virtual. But these are claims of a general nature; the objectification involved in these processes also needs careful and critical examination in order to help one understand how the spatiality of the ‘island’ is remade through the process of forming these new associations. This conception of islands as connected laboratories further emphasizes their existence as relational assemblies rather than isolated phenomena. Such a realization has implications for how we conceive islands as they emerge as new formations through the interaction with technologies of communication. Through these interactions, the social space of an ‘island’ is re-imagined, materially and technologically reworked, denoting an image of integration and connectivity with the rest of the world. While still an island in a geographical sense, and in that manner remote and isolated, the social space of a ‘connected island’ denies such connotations in many respects, through connectivity and the emphasis on being a part, or even at the centre, of the world.

In the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, which hit Iceland with noticeable magnitude, Icelanders are again left to contemplate and remake their place amidst worldly linkages. The notion of Iceland as an island at the centre of the world, conveniently set up to link with global financial centres, landed the country in considerable difficulties and has given rise to considerations about the way forward for the island nation. Political discussions about the island’s connections with Europe and integration with financial markets are at the forefront of current agendas. Similarly, the impact of the ‘remote’ island and its connections in terms of disrupting mobility and financial markets will need to be rethought by the rest of the world. From an island studies perspective, these ruptures further highlight the ever forming spatiality of islands. In the coming years, the notion of Iceland as an island - separate, as well as a part of the world - will be subject to further reconfigurations geographically, politically and culturally. In this manner, Cresswell (2003: 20) reminds us that places are never complete, finished or bounded, but always becoming: in process.

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