

An Ethnography on Technology and Behavior in Berlin

By Andrea Brucculeri

From the moment I stepped into SFX, the international airport located in the southern outskirts of Berlin, I knew Germans had a unique relationship with their electronics. There were cafes selling croissants with apricot jams, mall-like areas glowing with chocolates wrapped in gold foils and “I heart Berlin” refrigerator magnets, and baristas with hair back in long, rope-like braids serving German beers in warm glasses. But there were no power outlets to be found.

It’s not that Germans don’t have cell phones (they prefer the term *mobile phones* or in German, *ein Handy*.) It’s estimated that about two-thirds of all Germans own at least one mobile phone, and despite there being 82.29 million people in Germany, there are reportedly more than 100 million mobile phones.

I connected to the free airport WiFi to call a cab through Uber. This was not the common practice — slews of people were pouring out the baggage claim exits and heading for the busses and trains. I wouldn’t know about these options until later, and I thought I had a chance of befriending a German if I took a cab. I noticed lines of pale yellow taxis, but dismissed the option in case the drivers required cash payments. I was warned against using currency exchange booths inside the airport.

My Uber driver spoke English. He was a young Turkish man who had come to Berlin for university and had never left. He pointed out various buildings, murals, and statues on the ride, explaining their historical significance. He said that older people would tell me that Berlin just wasn’t the city that it used to be, that it wasn’t even German anymore. There were so many immigrants, refugees, and ex-pats that came to the city for the jobs and culture that Germans

hardly seemed to live there anymore. But Berlin was globally praised for its culture of art, music and friendliness, as well as the community's focus on living an eco-friendly humanitarian lifestyle. There was an incredibly diverse culinary universe within Berlin, as well as a focus on maintaining the city's abundant natural areas, parks, canals, and gardens.

“What's not to like?” I asked.

“People just don't like change,” he said.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at what would be my apartment building for the next nine weeks — a white stucco structure about 4 or 5 stories tall. It was checkered with balconies that were overflowing with flowers, ferns, vines, and any other plant life that could fit in the space. Large windows and balcony doors were left wide open, even on the ground floor, such that I or anyone else could step right into a stranger's apartment. There was no elevator, but thankfully I lived on the first floor so it wasn't a big deal (the ground floor in Europe is considered “floor 0” so as a first-floor inhabitant, I still had one flight of stairs to climb).

I lived in Tempelhof, a suburb south of Berlin's center that lacked the English speakers and air-conditioned spaces of areas closer to the city. My neighborhood was near the city's largest park, Tempelhof Field, which was an airport until 2008. There were a couple advantages to living in this quiet residential area — it was a 15-minute walk from the office I would be working in, and it allowed for a deeper look at German culture rather than the behaviors of the tourists who swarmed the city.

Despite working in Germany, I did not work with Germans. My office consisted of people from the US, Australia, France, Greece, Spain, Venezuela, India, Russia, Switzerland and Hong Kong. There was only one person from Germany, and I interacted with her very little.

Therefore, all of my observations regarding Germans and technology came from outside the office, although the office was where I observed people using technology the most.

Walking.

I never bought a bicycle, despite numerous recommendations. Work and the nearest train station were both less than 20 minutes walk away from my apartment, so I couldn't see myself using a bike enough to go through the trouble of buying and storing one. By the end of the summer, I had done quite a bit of walking.

The first thing that became apparent was how Germans interact with cross walks. To put it lightly, cross walks are taken very seriously. It can be an empty road, in the middle of the night, so quiet and so still that one could take a nap in the middle of the street. Yet Germans will not cross the street until they see the red figure turn into a green figure. It is nonnegotiable.

If you do choose to walk while the light is red, or "j-walk," make sure not to do it around children. This is a particularly egregious offense. An American friend of mine was stopped on the way to work in Germany by a mother holding the hand of a small child. He was scolded not only for crossing the street at the wrong time, but for daring to do it in front of her small, impressionable child. It was so startling for him that he made sure to warn me of this unspoken rule before I flew to Berlin. This, however, did not prevent me from j-walking during the first few weeks.

It was surprisingly easy to acclimate to the organized, rule-following culture. Of course, it applied to more than cross walks. Small crimes, such as littering and theft, were uncommon

enough for them to be largely unnoticeable in the city. For example, there were never any crushed cans or plastic bags floating through streets and parks (not that stores in Berlin used plastic bags, as you were expected to bring your own reusable bag) and many people didn't even bother to lock their bikes. It was, however, very important to lock all doors and windows before leaving the house for the day. Not because people were prone to breaking into homes, but because it was a rule insurance companies made. And Germans followed the rules.

Aside from the strict rule-following culture of Berlin, there also seemed to be a silent policy regarding talking on the phone. If I was walking to work early enough in the morning, some of my friends would still be awake in the United States (which was 6-9 time zones behind Germany). Many mornings I found myself chatting with people on the phone on the way to work, and the more I did it, the more pedestrians I seemed to irritate. It is as if the community decided to let me off the hook the first couple times, but as the weeks went on, my cultural deviation became increasingly offensive. During my morning walk phone calls, I would be closely observed by each person I passed, and occasionally avoided. I was never spoken to but was offered a spread of curious, guarded, or disapproving looks. Perhaps the streets were so quiet in the mornings that the noise of my American yapping was too disruptive, even though I tried to keep my voice low. Or maybe it was merely the notion that anyone would choose to chat on the phone instead of enjoying a beautiful morning walk.

While Germans on walks didn't use their phones for chatting, they certainly did use them for music. It seemed almost everyone, whether they be walking or biking, had headphones in their ears as they traveled. The large, bulky headphones with the plush cushions that covered the ears seemed to be particularly popular, and the classic white Apple headphones rarely made an

appearance. I suppose I can't be sure that it was music— it could have been podcasts, the radio, or even nothing. In any event, it certainly helped people better ignore me on my walk to work.

The main times my neighborhood pedestrians were without headphones were when they were either with other people or walking their dogs. Strangely, they never seemed to be “walking and talking” in the popular way seen in the US. Nor were they looking at their phones or using other gadgets. Groups of friends, parents with their children, and couples all walked along quietly and with thoughtful expressions. This might have been a byproduct of my presence, which always seemed to confuse, alarm, or irritate onlookers. Nonetheless, I rarely heard a word of German conversation. The only people I ever heard talking were speaking in American accents, or small children bouncing off to the neighborhood elementary school.

The dog-walking was a large matter of its own. Germans seem to reject the notion of leashes, as oftentimes dogs would be trailing several paces behind or in front of their owners. Virtually all the canines I encountered were small, about the size of house cats or just slightly larger, so it was never too intimidating to see so many strange dogs wandering around without leashes. However on two occasions I saw unleashed dogs become aggressive with each other, and this made me wonder if Germans had, as a collective, decided not to leash their dogs. It seemed only fair that if some dogs were unleashed, then all of them should be. This leveled the playing field for all canine residents.

Trains.

I couldn't be happier with the public transportation system in Berlin. Once I figured out the train system, I could get just about anywhere in the city for a few bucks, and I'd arrive in about the time it would take if I were traveling by car. It felt like I couldn't be more than a 15-minute walk from a train station if I tried. Trains came very frequently, even late at night, and buying tickets took less than a minute. It was brilliant. And liberating.

The trains in Berlin are so cheap and convenient that there isn't much incentive for people to drive or own cars. In my office, only one of the twelve regular employees owned a car. It was also apparent by looking out the window of my apartment that the locals who did own cars did not use them often. Vehicles were parked near the sidewalks (sometimes on the sidewalks) and many of them were so caked in pollen and leaves that it would take some significant cleaning and scraping to even see out the front windshield. In my neighborhood, it seemed the exact same cars stood in the exact same places collecting leaves all summer long. This also explained why there was rarely traffic of any kind in the city.

Trains were usually quiet (not the machinery, the passengers). Many trains were underground, which meant that it wasn't much use to "look out the window." There was no striking up conversations with strangers, although sometimes friends and couples would speak softly to each other. The most popular time-killer was just staring blankly ahead or at the walls of the train. Listening to music (or at least, wearing headphones and pretending to) was a close second. The bulky headphones were even more popular on trains than they were on walks and bike rides. I suspect this is because the trains could be a bit loud, and the noise-canceling feature of these headphones was probably a nice respite.

While some of the younger crowd played on their phones, this wasn't the most viable option because there was rarely any cell service on the trains, and while train stations offered free WiFi, the areas between train stations did not. The attempts to use phones increased at night and also increased closer to the city center. The stations near my neighborhood more commonly had people sleeping or gazing into the abyss.

Rules on the trains, much like everywhere else, were serious business. Occasionally I would find myself in a section with an unusually high concentration of people traveling with their bikes. I originally assumed it was a coincidence, but soon found that this was the result of standing in a designated bike section. I soon learned to avoid these parts of the trains because there was so little space available. It made me wonder if there were other special sections and rules that I didn't know about.

Then, I met a ticket checker.

While it had occurred to me that I could probably ride trains all day without buying any tickets with no consequences, I went ahead and bought a ticket for every ride because I assumed that trains, much like so many things in Berlin, worked off the honor system and I wanted to be a good American visitor. But as it turns out, it is only an honor system most of the time. Once in a while, a man walks through the train checking everyone's tickets.

He was short with a perfect circle of baldness on his head. His shirt was blue, tucked into his belt. He was large, with sizable hands and eyes. But most importantly, he *spoke to me*. The man looked at me and spoke to me in German with a directness that virtually no one else had before. And I had no clue what on earth was going on.

“What?”

He repeated something in German.

I squinted at him.

Realizing I only spoke English, or perhaps bored, he moved along, sauntering through the isle and methodically asking for tickets and checking their validity with a scanner device in his hand. He kept looking back at me, as if planning to visit me last after allowing me the time to figure out what he was doing on the train. I had a ticket, and I happily would have given it to him. But before the man could circle back to me, he found someone who didn't have a ticket. And this is was when I learned why Germans were so good at sticking to the train ticket honor system.

The train stopped. A man wearing a pink hat and carrying a large cloth bag overflowing with objects tried to step off the train once he was asked to show his ticket. The ticket checker yelled something in German, quickly shouldering his way off the train in pursuit of the ticketless man. The man broke into a sprint, heading for the stairs that lead out of the train station. The ticket checker bolted after him, shouting, grabbing at his shirt and bag. The cloth bag was knocked and a spray of objects fell onto the floor. The escapee yelled something but was preoccupied with shoving the ticket checker away as his fallen items clattered down the staircase.

There was a blur of limbs — grabbing hair, thrashing, shouting, a fit of struggling bodies.

I wish I could tell you how this debacle ended, but the train pulled away and I was left gawking out the window. This was the most violence I saw during my entire stay in Germany.

Internet.

The internet in Germany was a subject of anxiety and mystery.

While Germany has a free and open internet, the government takes much more interest in what people were doing on their personal computers than I've experienced in other countries. "They" (whoever "they" were, no one seemed to know) ran a tight ship, and people frequently received fines in the mail for finding themselves on the wrong websites or streaming the wrong videos. Or, so I was told.

The paranoia of German citizens was more interesting to me than the actual German Internet laws. Legally speaking, Germany's Internet is just as "free" as the United States.

The lore goes that the German government has been pretty paranoid about a Nazi Regime relapse after the rise of the Internet, and World War II is a pretty embarrassing subject that they'd really like to keep in the history books. In the name of keeping citizens lawful and away from genocide, the government keeps an eye on what people do online. They take names, keep lists, and try to stop even minor online crimes before they start. Or, so I was told.

In response to this, there is a popular service in which people pay monthly or annual fees to have a lawyer on deck in case they accidentally (or, not so accidentally) do something illegal on the internet. Pirating movies is an especially common offense that the government are particularly good at monitoring. I was warned early on to never attempt to pirate a movie because, "they WILL catch you. Every time."

To help increase their sense of privacy, many of the Germans I met had different names for themselves online. For example, one woman named Caroline had the first name "Eni" on her social media platforms. This made it a little confusing to figure out which Skype profile was

hers, and it also didn't help me learn names any quicker. The fake name trend helped me realize why in Germany there was an increased popularity with directly sharing social media links rather than people just saying, "look me up on Facebook."

In addition to changed names, the of my Berlin friends who I follow on social media do not post pictures of themselves on the internet. Their Instagrams are full of pictures of things, places, and art, but rarely people. Their Facebooks are used for sharing news, not vacations and videos. Snapchat was so unpopular in Berlin that I never found anyone who had the app at all.

One of my friends even warned me that I should never post pictures that include my Berlin friends on social media because this could upset or offend them. It is considered an invasion of their privacy. I, of course, did not receive this warning before offending numerous people.

Restaurants.

While phones were strange on quiet morning walks, they were downright nonexistent in restaurants. In America, I am used to seeing children playing games and watching shows on iPads and gameboys, friends looking at their phones and each other's devices as they hold conversations (or, as they don't), and adults scrolling through news or pictures on tablets while on casual outings with their families. People are frequently chatting on the phone at dinner tables, or texting people, or otherwise playing with their smartphones. It's so common that it is almost special to see a table of people without any electronic devices on the table.

My only comment on restaurants in Germany is that this was simply not the case. Virtually no one touches their phone in a restaurant. The people I did observe using their phones were often young adults or teenagers, many of which appeared to be tourists (which was made clear by their accents and clothes). Restaurants were otherwise just places for good ol' face-to-face socializing. It was even less common for young children to be out to eat with their families, although I'm not sure why this is. There are even some restaurants in Germany that do not allow children at all.

Music.

I've mentioned music quite a bit up to this point. Music in Berlin was not merely a form of art for people to enjoy. Music could have quite a bit to do with the course of an individual's life.

I know that sounds crazy, but hear me out.

"Clubbing" is the main source of nightlife in Berlin. In most US cities, bars and clubs close before 3 AM. Berlin doesn't have any laws preventing alcohol from being served after a certain time or only on specific days. This makes clubbing an all-night activity, usually beginning after midnight and ending around 6 AM. In fact, the city is considerably more alive at 6 AM than it is at 10 AM on any given day.

Clubs in Berlin pride themselves on hosting certain DJs and playing specific types of music. I'm not talking about "hip-hop" or "techno" as specific types. It seems any genre of music I could think of could actually be broken into a dozen or so subtypes, all of which were highly

distinguishable to Germans and of no apparent difference to me. The subtypes of music a person enjoyed were often a point of pride, and Germans made a point to only visit the clubs that suited their particular taste. This also meant that people would avoid clubs that used DJs or genres that they didn't like, which meant they would only go out with people who listened to the same music and therefore want to dance in the same clubs as them. Therefore, friend groups were often determined by music taste. No exaggeration — friendships would disintegrate if two people could not agree on a mutually enjoyable club. New friendships would form as people recognized similar tastes in music or saw each other repeatedly at the same clubs.

Further, not just anyone can enter any club.

Clubs in Berlin are easily distinguishable because at night, there will be long lines outside their doors. To get to the door of a club, a person can expect to wait 30 minutes to three hours depending on the popularity of the club. However, once a person reaches the door, they still may not be let in. Clubs in Berlin have particularly picky crews manning the doors. The doorman crews will look you over— take in your clothes, your expression, and perhaps your general “vibe” and simply decide you aren't allowed in their club tonight. The process felt entirely random to me — it did not seem like particularly well dressed or attractive people were the ones getting into clubs. Nor did it seem like the doormen were aiming for a specific age group, race, gender, nationality, hairstyle, or anything else. In fact the process was so random, it was infuriating for my all-American mentality, which insisted that this just wasn't fair. The only pattern that seemed to hold true was how horribly difficult it was to enter a popular club as a tourist. This caused me difficulties until my friends helped me learn what I should wear to look

more like a local, and instructed me not to speak when we neared the front of the line so the doormen couldn't pick up my American accent.

Naturally, some clubs are more choosy and difficult to get into than others, creating a club hierarchy. Berlin's most exclusive nightclub is called Berghain, and even though the DJs and dance floors inside are legendary, most people don't even waste their time trying to get in. According to locals, even "regulars" are only known to get in about 70% of the time, and the majority of people never get in at all.

Thankfully, not all clubs are so difficult. There are plenty of places for people to go even if they don't have the right "look," "vibe," or luck to go to the more highly regarded clubs. This is where friend groups become effected— if only certain members of a social circle are admitted to a popular club, this could change a night that started with "let's all go out together" to ending with friends at four different clubs in various parts of Berlin. Which is why it is advantageous to hang out with people who are often given entry to the same clubs that you are, and who aim to get into the same clubs as you. After all, why go to a moombahcore club when you're totally a moombahsoul guy?

Where are all the Germans?

It came up almost every time I was at a bar, club, or any kind of social gathering. A conversation would float by that included some commentary about the different languages and nationalities of the people who were dancing or drinking together, and someone would say, "isn't it weird that *none* of us are German?"

The cab drivers were from Turkey and Italy. The woman checking me out at the pharmacy was from Switzerland. The pilots were American. The DJ's were from Greece, Belgium, and the Czech Republic. The man I asked for help while confused about train tickets was from the UK and the child who was lost in Maur Park was from India. One day I thumped my beer glass down on the bar, looked at my French coworker and asked, "Where are all the Germans?"

"Everywhere," she said, waving her hand holding her cigarette for emphasis.

"How is that possible?" I demanded. "I've been here two months. I must have had conversations with at least a hundred different people. I've only met two Germans, and one of them is from the office so I don't think that counts."

"What business does a German have speaking with you?" She sucked on her cigarette and let the smoke out slowly.

"What?"

"You're an American. You're just like everyone else. You come, you're here for a bit, and then you leave. That's what everyone does in Berlin. But not the Germans. This is their home. Would you spend time making friends with people who you'd inevitably lose?"

I frowned. "I made friends with you. With everyone at the office."

She lowered her cigarette and looked at me intently. "But would you do it over and over again? Day in and day out. Your whole life. Opening up to people, connecting with them, giving them your time, and then watching them leave and never return? Would you keep befriending Americans if every one you'd ever met left you within a year? If the only people you could ever rely on for the long run were *Germans*?"

I stared at her, feeling my life become contextualized. I thought about my neighborhood walks and how I seemed to receive more negative attention with time. I thought about the ticket checker on the train, who ran off a train after someone but hardly seem to care that I couldn't understand him and wasn't showing him my ticket. I thought about the clubs, how tourists never seemed to be able to get into them and how many times I had to try my luck to be accepted. I thought about the restaurant waitstaff, who were always very kind but made our interactions as brief as possible. I thought about every curt nod from the German cashier at the grocer store and every event in which I was surrounded by hundreds of Germans, talking to my friends from Australia and Greece, wondering where all the Germans were hiding in Berlin.

"I'm sure you're spoken with plenty of Germans," she said, returning her smile to her mouth, "but they didn't tell you they were from Germany. The conversation didn't get that far."

A summer in Berlin left me with this: Berlin offers an outstandingly loving and playful culture, but it only exists within the inhabitants themselves. The casual observer will not see the depths of Berlin's rich and sprawling musical mien, nor will he be able to find the Homeless Veggie Dinner gathering spot, where dozens of volunteers prepare free, nutritious meals using donated food. Berlin is no place for the passive. It is a city to engage with. I suspect this is why phones don't make appearances during cafe conversations and morning walks — people are aware that there is much more to see without their screens. There is much more to be had from a train ride of thoughts and observations than of phone games and social media feeds. This awareness allows the people of Germany to live within the world of technology without becoming mere extensions of their technology.

On my last day in Berlin, a close friend sat with me on a river bank while the sun sank out of the sky. There was a rush and hiss of leaves in each long breath of the wind, but the water was surprisingly quiet for how much of it there was.

“Will you come back to Berlin next summer?” she asked.

“I can try,” I said.

She looked at me, eyebrows pinched in pain, only traces of light defining her face. We both knew in that moment that I wouldn't be returning so soon.

We walked down the length of the river before wandering toward the trains. The goodbye was short because it hurt.

I knew, then, that I had no business befriending Germans.

Sources:

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