

## **Mobile Communication Society?**

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Friend 1: We were waiting at a place with reception. We tried calling you, too, but could only call your home number. Why don't you get a *keitai* (mobile phone in Japanese)?

Friend 2: You have a lot of nerve not carrying a *keitai* in this day and age?

Friend 3: Yeah, it's weird.

- a scene from a film: "A man without a mobile phone" (Kato, p. 108, in Ito et al. 2005)

The mobile phone (cell phone, U.S.) has been the most rapidly disseminated technology in world history. The first commercially available mobile telephone networks were developed in the 1980s. In 1994, Finland was leading in the relative number of subscribers, which had just exceeded 10% of the population. In 2004, there were almost two billion mobile subscribers world-wide. Most industrially developed (OECD) countries have a penetration rate well over 70%, and most developing countries are following this swiftly (Castells et al. 2007; Ling 2004).

A phenomenon of this kind is a sociological wonder, demonstrating the increasing world networking. However, details of this development also show persistent cultural differentiation. The appropriation of mobile phones by no means leads to uniform cultural and social development. Indeed, mobile communication is indexically tied to local circumstances and ways of life that may somehow be affected, enriched or modified by the potential of mobile communication, but local paths of development have not yet been combined.

The mobile communication technologies are the latest products enabling seamless interaction between people and integrating the global network. They may well turn out to be one of those technologies whose impact on the organization of social action and societies and the resulting cultural and political upheavals we may start to appreciate only afterwards (McNeil & McNeil 2003). Further, the impact of innovation is always a two-way process. Innovation is created through its appropriation, through the daily practices of the people implementing it. Following current social studies of science, we may conclude that mobile phones do not have any immediate social impact, but that there is interplay between mobile phones and societies that is open to multifaceted developments that I will try to explore by reference to recent literature.

### **The indexicality of mobile communication**

Mobile communication is integrated with everyday practices and identities (Ito et al. 2005). It is extrovert and grounded in mundane routines, workscapes and moments of sociability. This embeddedness into the most trivial, tiny and inconsequential daily

matters is also the key to its success. As Roos had already pointed out in 1993 “the mobile telephone rapidly becomes a normal, self-evident part of one's life (“I don't understand how I managed before”)“. Anchoring to daily routines and errands creates a dual nature for mobile media, making them both global and intimately local.

The intimate linkage to local cultures and practices makes it understandable why mobile communication takes different directions in different parts of the world. Ito states (p.7) in her introduction: “The current variability in wireless deployment is not necessarily on its way to becoming standardized toward universal access but is a symptom of fundamentally heterogeneous and resilient sociotechnical formations that vary across lines such as gender, nation, class, institutional location, and age. Our narrative is not of a single technology disseminated to multiple contexts but of the heterogeneous co-constitution of technology across a transnational stage.” At the global level, we can see roughly four broad lines of sociotechnical development in mobile communication: Europe, Industrialized Asia (e.g., Japan, and Korea), North America and developing countries. They all have appropriated mobile communication in distinctive ways, and evolved in different directions.

Scandinavia was leading mobile development at its inception, as it managed to develop the first automated mobile system covering the whole region. Along with the rest of Europe, Scandinavia lost its momentum in the massive, failed investments in “3G” or “UMTS” at the turn of the millennium. Industrialized Asia is currently the leading edge in mobile development. Keitai e-mail has successfully combined some of the features of e-mail and text messaging, providing opportunities for multimodal communication. In all, the Japanese and Korean business models and technologies have proved superior in attracting larger segments of consumers into new forms of communication. In contrast, Northern America has been very slow to adopt mobile technologies. Ling (2004) points out three factors that have contributed to the tardiness in Northern America: the lack of a joint standard, the selection of a pricing system, and competitive alternative web-based media. In the United States, interoperability has developed slowly as there have been competing standards. Pricing has been based on sharing the cost between the caller and the receiver, making mobile calls “unwanted”. Further, the advanced web-based solutions together with increased local wireless networks have lessened interest in mobile communication. In developing countries, for their part, mobile communication is often adopted as the first communication system allowing access to distant others having an impact on its appropriation (Horst & Miller 2006).

The fact that the failure of “UMTS” and “WAP” is mentioned only in passing, if at all, in the literature is also telling (for the most adequate account, see Foggin 2005). First, a positive bias reigns in technology studies just as in medical research. Failures are not publishable, only success stories get printed, which distorts the view of history. Further, despite increased efforts at multidisciplinary research, the boundaries between engineering, economics and social and human studies have remained firm. The flop of Universal Mobile Telephone System, including interventionist European regulatory politics (the selling of over-priced UMTS licenses) is itself an indication of lack of a unified vision, one-sided trust in technologies and lack of sufficient consideration of the social dimension. Unfortunately, the literature reviewed also remains too much within the confines of disciplines to address this historically consequential chain of events that led Europe to lose its advantage in the development of communication networks.

## **Emerging patterns of mobile communication**

Mobile devices allow new emerging types of communication that enable or contribute to the development of new forms of social action having an impact on the patterns of establishment and maintenance of social networks. In everyday terms, mobile communication enables flexible real-time coordination of social action. According to Ling (2004), mobile communication may partly replace objective time as a tool of coordination. The profundity of this change may not yet be understood. The significance of the mechanical time-keeping for the whole process of industrialization was only realized afterwards (Mumford 1934); mobile coordination may turn out to be essential to the post-industrialization of societies. It is not just a cool way to run errands, but a shift in the conventional orchestration of the ways in which people get together, share their time and experiences. The shifts in this scale pose challenges for the sciences. The changes in the organization of the well-established basis of everyday life may elude standard scientific tools such as survey questionnaires that address only discursively available matters, not mundane trivia, despite the profound consequences it may have.

A corollary of flexible scheduling that requires continuing communication is constant accountability. Mobile actors who share their time and experiences with each other are also continually available for monitoring and control (see Green 2002a; Roos 1993). This mobile panopticon is probably one basis for continuing fears concerning stress and the alienating coercive forces of mobile technologies. At worst, the ruthless use of mobile technologies may expose employees to constant monitoring and blur the boundary between work and free time in a negative way.

Mobile communication, however, is not indexical simply to social order and networks; it is also the first personalized medium for distant communication. In many cultures, mobile phones have become practically inseparable parts of their users. They are not just medium, but also emotionally invested objects that are imaginative representations of their users, among teens in Japan in particular (Ito et al. 2005). The personal nature of communication also has an impact on the nature of communication that has developed into a new genre of its own. This personalization also covers ring-tones so that they can differentiate different callers, enabling the answerers to prepare themselves to address the callers in an appropriate way (Bell 2005; Arminen & Leinonen 2006).

In all, mobile communication may be part of the development of an online society in which everyone is expected to be available all the time everywhere. Online society is developing an m-etiquette of its own, involving norms for reciprocating the messages/calls you get and to be always available (Laursen 2005). The increase in mobile multimedia may accelerate the communication through various media – text, talk, images – so that copresent interactions and mediated distant exchanges may at times seem to be woven into a seamless web (Licoppe 2004) The mobile presence of distant others both at work and in leisure can at times be disruptive, but it may also intensify face-to-face interactions (Arminen 2007).

## **The metaphorical richness of mobile communication**

The close tie between mobile communication and social practices and meaning-making can also be seen in its metaphorical richness. An area that has turned out to be particularly rich in metaphors is “mobile time”, which is often connected to spatiality, “mobile time-space” (Arminen 2007). Greene (2002b) called a mobile phone the “Lazarus device” that can revive “dead moments”. She meant that mobile communication “fills empty moments”; e.g., while waiting for something or on the way to somewhere. For Castells et al. (2007) mobile communication provides the ultimate form of the network society, in which “timeless time” and “spaceless space” prevail. That is, networks extend beyond any individual location and time zone, creating their own time-space that is extended to all everywhere at all times through mobiles. Others have also addressed this issue through various notions, including “interspace” (Hulme & Truch 2005). Ling (2004) added a new layer to these conceptions with his term “softening of time”. As a new form of real-time coordination of social action, mobile communication has the capacity to relieve people from “objective time”, thus “softening time”.

There are also plenty of metaphors that suggest the emotional and imaginative significance of mobile communication. Geser (2005) and Ling (2004) have depicted the mobile phone as “an umbilical cord” that enables ubiquitous and immediate access to loved ones. For Geser, the consequences of strengthening of ties with intimates and friends are potentially regressive. He maintains that mobile phones can be “antievolutionary devices”, “pacifiers for adults”, that may promote regression into “pre-modern” networks dominated by kinships and closed communities. Quite similarly, some psychoanalytically inspired Finnish researchers termed the mobile phone a “substitute for the breast”. More precisely, they applied an idea suggested by D.W. Winnicott (1953) of a “transfer object” to mobile phones, and portrayed a cultural shift from yuppies’ “phallic phones” to teenagers’ “teddy bear phones” that provide support for emotional anxieties. These views, however, were not uniformly accepted, and a “science war” broke out in 1999-2001 concerning how far “cultural studies” can go, and what kind of empirical basis claims should have. Nevertheless, security and emotional support seem to be basic functions of mobile communication. Ling (2004) has captured this aspect in the phrase “virtual walled community”, suggesting that the names listed in the directory of the phone form a sort of closed, supporting community.

The third source of metaphors of mobile communication is their role in the expression of identity. In Finland, one of the first mobile phone models was called “cityman”, which became the yuppie phone. By contemporary standards, it was massive and designed so that it could “stand” on a table. The phallic imagery was obvious (Roos 1993). An often-repeated joke ran that only those who do not have it need it. This phallic imagery was nicely echoed in much of the early studies of mobile phones addressing “the penetration level”, i.e., the ratio of people with mobile devices in a given population. The expressive usage of mobile phones by teenagers has been recently caught by calling their devices “new ghetto blasters”.

Ultimately the metaphors seem to derive from the indexical nature of mobile communication, alluding to the generation of meanings in social practices.

### **Debates on mobile phones**

Mobile phones are also fiercely debated, both in everyday life and in academia. There are ongoing negotiations on how much disturbance can be tolerated, and norms clearly differ between societies and cultures. Youth for its part uses mobile phones to claim the surrounding space for them (Weilenmann & Larson 2002). The early stage of appropriation of mobile phones was characterized by initial ambivalence, both in Japan and Finland. The Finnish scene was dominated by the ambivalence between the mobile phone as a status symbol and an object of hatred and envy (Roos 1993). In Japan, there was also moral panic against bad mannered mobile young people (Matsuda 2005). This initial ambivalence toward any new technology may be a systematic social phenomenon arising from a preference to sustain life as it is and the new social opportunities and benefits technology offers. The domestication of the technology approach might benefit from taking this conflict into account more systematically. The initial ambivalence in the appropriation of technologies and media needs to be researched thoroughly.

The appropriation of mobile multimedia may be, just now, at the stage of initial ambivalence. A general backlash against mobile multimedia took place following the high hopes and hype surrounding the millennium. The literature does not yet seem to provide a unified account of what is going on in this respect. Castells et al. (2007) seem to believe in the growth of the Wi-Fi Internet and convergence of mobile telephony into local networks. In Japan, the multimodality and non-vocal uses of mobile telephones also continue to grow, though more slowly than was initially anticipated.

The academic debates on mobile telephony concern its consequences. The sociological debate is over the impact of mobile communication on social cohesion – what will happen to social cohesion in the mobile era? Those who have been concerned about social erosion refer to “balkanization” (Ling 2004; Geser 2005)). Originally, balkanization was a geopolitical term describing the fragmentation of a region into smaller units that are hostile or non-cooperative with each other. In its sociological usage, it means social disintegration and the breakdown of cooperation due to the rise of hostile, competitive sub-units. Geser has suggested in a theoretical argument that telephone technologies are predominantly vertical media that do not allow horizontal network growth, and are to disorganize traditional bureaucracies and rational organization of societies. Ling (2004) also sees mobile phones as allowing people to escape immediate situations to interaction with like-minded people. This strengthens egocentric networks, and may at worst lead to the tragedy of the commons, a balkanized world in which the tyranny of the like-minded prevails. In the mobile world, communication take place in a small like-minded group, “the inner circle”. Mobile communication opens up a chance to close oneself off from all other parties. That is, the intensity and the pace of reciprocal communication in the inner circle is so inviting that people within a communication net no longer have the time or energy to participate in any other social action. A closure of the inner circle thus takes place; the tragedy of the commons is set in motion. Rephrasing Neil Postman’s (in)famous dictum, we communicate ourselves to death.

Not all have agreed on this vision. Castells et al. (2007) bluntly state their view on the socio-political consequences of mobile communication: “Thus our statement, based on observation, is value neutral: wireless communication considerably increases the information and communication power of people at large, making them more independent of formal sources of information” (p. 256).

In fact, the impact of mobile communication on social cohesion is potentially empirically testable. If the balkanization hypothesis holds, individual communication networks should be getting narrower. That is, even though person-to-person communication overall has increased, its quality should have been changed so that more and more communication happens amongst the like-minded. This would be a cool hypothesis to test that could produce interesting results.

Another alternative hypothesis could be posed. Following the analysis of the accumulation of hobbies by Allardt et al. (1958), we could hypothesize on the accumulation of communication. Allardt and his colleagues originally encountered the paradoxical observation concerning young people that those who drank most alcohol were also most active in sports and other societies. After a careful elaboration, they concluded that there was an accumulation of hobbies. Those who are active in one thing tend to be active in other things. Therefore, those who have most hobbies also drink most, even though there was no logical connection between drinking and other hobbies. Since then the accumulation of hobbies (including both “bad” and “good” hobbies) has been demonstrated several times.

A corresponding hypothesis could be posed on communication. Communication accumulates. Those who communicate most, also communicate most with the largest variety of people. Most communication does occur between a small “semi-closed” circle of close friends and (nuclear) family, but the more people communicate, the more they communicate with people outside this circle. An empirical study could show whether balkanization or the accumulation of communication or neither turns out to be the reality.

### **The future of the mobile communication society**

The current vision seems to be that mobile communication converges with the increase in local wireless networks. This will lead to a development that was not foreseen some years ago, when a universal mobile telephone system was on the agenda. The convergence will merge the internet and mobile phones as we know them now. It is unlikely that the strict distinction between mobile and stationary devices will persist, or their classifications or standardized patterns of use. This development will also pose increasing challenges for social studies that may have some essential role in bridging vastly expanding technological potential and human life-worlds that set the final limits to what will be considered adequate, appropriate and desirable features of ubiquitous communication.

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