

MOBILE PHONES, IDENTITY AND DISCURSIVE INTIMACY

Raul Pertierra

Asian Center, University of the Philippines

Abstract: *This paper deals with the sociocultural effects of mobile phones in Philippine society. In particular it looks at how mobile phones have affected notions of identity and the rise of the sexual subject. It also deals with the political possibilities and implication of this new communicative technology in a society with previously poorly developed telephonic and other communicative technologies. Mobile phones allow absent subjects to exercise a daily presence in their communities of origin. This absent presence generates virtual subjects interacting primarily via the mobile phone.*

Keywords: *computer-mediated-interactive-communication-technology (CMICT), cyber-world, scribed spaces, texting subjects, post-corporeal, coup-d'text.*

INTRODUCTION

A major consequence of late modernity is the increasing intercalation and accumulation of information. The United Nations has recognized this by holding a World Summit on the Information Society in Geneva in 2003 (see World Summit, 2005). In this informationally based global order, new sources of inequality are developing. Access to the generation, distribution and consumption of information becomes a crucial component of the economy, politics and culture. The new technologies of information have not only exponentially increased their capacities but have also the potential to share and distribute information at very low costs. A world of almost unlimited information accessible to most people is technically within reach but its utopian possibilities remain unfulfilled. Like all other technologies, social and political factors eventually determine their relevance and effectiveness. The United Nations has accepted the crucial role of information technology but it is still unable to suggest political solutions for its employment towards attaining a more equitable, stable and prosperous world.

Information and global networks

During the past decade, global change has been shaped by the new paradigm of trade facilitated by information technologies (Kuvaja & Mursu, 2003). Industrial societies have been increasingly turned into informational societies in which economic success is determined by the capacity to process and exploit information. This has resulted in a more networked world where inclusion and exclusion are determined by access to the Net.

The variety of the writings on globalization indicates that the interpretations of this phenomenon are multiplex. Globalization is often understood either in its narrow sense, referring only to economic interaction, or as a more complex process of interdependence between nation-states, cultures, politics and economies. The World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, established in February 2002, defines globalization as the progressive integration of economies and societies (see World Commission, 2004). The Commission points out that globalization involves trade, investment and technology that bring societies closer. Castells and Himanen (2002) have argued that the information and communication technologies have encouraged globalization but also threatened the viability of the welfare state. As economies struggle to compete in the global market, social services hitherto taken for granted are being eroded. While technologies have intensified globalization by bringing prosperity to some countries, they have also undermined the participation of the weaker ones. Moreover, accompanying globalization are also various processes of localization. Greater mobility and constant connectivity have encouraged the resurgence and maintenance of local communities. A global culture generates its own local resistances.

The new interactive media

Although the applications of information technology (e.g., Internet, mobile phones, etc.) are often similar, their specific social and cultural impact varies nationally, as these technologies are influenced by particular cultural traditions, power structures and economic resources. Societies and information technologies engage dialogically, where each is shaped by the needs of the other. This, however, does not mean that societies will be determined by information technologies or that societies can dictate the course of information and communication technology (ICT) development. The case of mobile phones in the Philippines demonstrates how a globally introduced information technology application interacts with local sociocultural conditions. This interaction is not only materialized in indigenized applications of the global technology but it also represents the way that modernity, as a social condition of globalization, is manifested in a Philippine context.

The concept of the digital divide refers to inequalities in the access to and the use of the ICTs. The digital divide, or digital inequality, is not only about the existence or nonexistence of infrastructure. The provision of the physical access is necessary but it is not sufficient. Digital inequality refers to “real access,” which includes cognitive and cultural capital as well as technical resources (Kuvaja & Mursu, 2003; Warschauer, 2003). Real access goes beyond infrastructure and refers to people’s actual possibilities to use technology to improve their lives. The technology itself does not ensure its equal and efficient use but real access is ensured only when appropriate technologies are introduced into political, economic and social environments conducive to people’s participation.

Mobile phones are increasingly taking a major role in this communication revolution and are often referred to as one of the “new media.” (Each of these new media is characterized as a computer-mediated-interactive-communication technology, or CMICT.) The interconnectivities of mobile telephony, desktop computers, radio, television and print are producing new communication structures with often unpredictable consequences. But it is certain that the new media will bring about important social changes at distinct levels of social structures, from personal identity to political mobilization, from consumer choices to global corporations, from virtual spaces or simulated models to lived realities and embodied geographies. Hopefully, the new media may assist in gathering and disseminating alternative information sources, creating virtual public spaces where citizens can debate vital issues and organize appropriate political action.

Cosmopolitanism and glocalization

This new informational order is usually seen as a process of cosmopolitanization but it is also associated with the return of locality and the revitalization of diasporal and virtual communities. In the recent past, the new media mainly involved the Internet and its associated technologies. The term *new media* evoked cyberspace, constructed as a virtual environment detached from the physical world, a place where people could inhabit and create new types of communities. Often this involved hybrid spaces combining the global with the local (glocal).

Virtual communities have often been studied as narrative spaces where users create collective environments composed mainly of texts. More recently, the idea of a virtual world, a simulated space, completely disconnected from our physical environment, is challenged by the emergence of mobile devices. These communities of mobile phone users, or phoneurs, result in diasporic collectivities whose members inhabit embodied but transhumant mobile spaces.

Unlike desktops and other immobile technologies, mobile phones more closely resemble tools or prosthetic devices as extensions of the body. They become extensions of the hand, allowing us to connect anytime, anywhere, with anybody. Bodies themselves become writing devices as phoneurs negotiate new urban spaces. Urbanity itself becomes a feature of the new mobility. This new urbanity is complemented by other communication technologies such as video, DVD, and other multimedia interfaces. With the aid of nomadic technologies, virtual social communities in diaspora emerge in physical spaces. In this context, CMICTs play an active role in creating new types of communication and social networks.

Nomadic technologies and new physicalities

Cyberspace has frequently been regarded as utopian spaces in which users are able to project their imagination. When communities are shaped in a hybrid space, CMICTs become new tools for creating novel and unpredictable imaginary spaces, renarrating lived space. While fixed Internet users do not have the ability to move through physical space, the emergence of nomadic interfaces makes possible mobile imaginary spaces to be enacted and constructed within physical space. Hence, nomadic technologies have a role in the construction of narrative spaces. They allow virtual spaces to be mobile, bringing them into the physical world.

Communities on the Internet are formed independently of the physical location of their members. With nomadic technology, it is possible to communicate with people both distant and nearby. Location awareness embedded in mobile devices strengthens the connection to

physical spaces, creating new geographies of mobility. Mobile devices and interfaces make us aware of the importance of physicality when dealing with digital spaces. It is in this sense that mobile phones can be perceived as writing devices. Writing in a broader sense (not only SMS or MMS) means the creation of narrative and imaginary spaces. Cell phones are new media devices writing in both physical and hybrid spaces, transforming them into textographic, or scribed, spaces.

Concrete and embedded theorization

This paper is part of a project that examines how CMICTs, and in particular the mobile phone, work their way through social and cultural sectors in the Philippines. The extraordinary adoption of the mobile phone, and to a lesser extent the Internet, may be expected to bring about important changes. No other modern technology has had such a rapid and extensive acceptance within Philippine society (Pertierra, 2003). I explored how CMICTs (i.e., mobile phones and the Internet) are absorbed into the routines of everyday life. This should give us a clearer understanding of why, how, and for whom these practices are so consequential. This paper limits itself to the effects of mobile phones on notions of identity and subjectivity, given its ability to extend discourses of intimacy.

While this project examines the practical effects of CMICTs in specific communities, it is also concerned with a theoretical conceptualization of this new technology. Part of the problem with CMICTs is not just their novelty or almost immediate impact on society but their lack of adequate theorization. It is often difficult to distinguish media hype from sober reality. Even academics, mesmerized by CMICTs' postmodern promises, often abandon their usual critical and skeptical positions. The virtual and cyber worlds made possible by CMICTs have not only seduced politicians, media commentators, and policy planners but also scholars. Most research in this field limits itself to descriptions or to wild speculations about post-corporeal life (Kirby, 1997).

We have already explored some of these theoretical issues in earlier studies (Pertierra, et al., 2002) but further theoretical and empirical research is necessary before we acquire an adequate understanding of the significance of CMICTs in developing societies such as the Philippines.

CMICT bases for constituting identities and structures

The capacity to store and transmit large amounts of information, combined with instant, interactive and perpetual connectivity, is the main feature of these technologies. Their applications are virtually endless but their effects are often unpredictable. Societies and cultures hitherto built on face-to-face oral communication are reconstituting themselves along unexpected grounds.

Overseas Filipinos enjoy an "absent presence" in their original home communities. Diasporic and cosmopolitan identities are taking new and radical hybridities. CMICTs are not only used to connect, they also mediate and shape relationships. For example, the capacity of the technologies to make an absence present ensures that virtual subjects exercise a post-corporeal agency.

Mobile phones

These new technologies pose particular problems as well as promises for developing countries such as the Philippines. The Philippines has shown that the acceptance of technology (i.e., mobile phones) has a leap-frogging capacity. There are now seven times the number of mobile phones compared to subscribed landlines in the country (Lallana, 2004). Mobile phones have not just overtaken landlines but have opened hitherto economically unprofitable regions. Prepaid cards make mobile phones accessible to most Filipinos (28% penetration rates and growing rapidly; Lallana, 2004). This has not only facilitated communications in formerly isolated areas but has allowed Filipino overseas workers (8 million) to remain in contact with their families.

The Filipino diaspora have produced a more cosmopolitan outlook, often replacing a local or even national orientation. An expression of this new cosmopolitanism is the recently passed law enabling Filipinos to hold dual citizenship. This development recognizes that identities are now more plural than hitherto. CMICTs encourage and facilitate such cosmopolitan orientations.

The Philippines is known as the texting capital of the world. Filipinos send over 200 million texts daily, ten times the per capita world average (Lallana, 2004). Texting allows Filipinos to express themselves in new ways. They text what they would not normally say in a face-to-face encounter. This has led to new ways of relating with others as well as opened areas of inner-subjective reflection. New and radical identities become possible.

However, these technologies have also had less immediately beneficial consequences. Cell phone theft is now a major criminal problem in urban areas. Youth gambling has also become a major concern, given its close association with recreational texting. But civil society has also used it to organize political protests, aiding in the overthrow of President Estrada in January 2001 (Perterra et al., 2002). This capacity of CMICTs to mobilize people has also been reported for countries such as Venezuela during its current strife. CMICTs enable what are referred to as “smart mobs,” loosely organized groups capable of micro-coordinating their activities for specific purposes (Rheingold, 2002).

Smart mobs differ from political demonstrations by the lack of a controlling center. Instead, they consist of loose networks, often P2P (person-to-person) linkages resulting in the close coordination of otherwise independent members. The model of center-periphery or a central hierarchy is replaced by multicentric nodes of mobilization. Each node is autonomous but capable of microcoordinating its movements with other nodes for a specific and often single-issued end. Their relative autonomy allows for diverse nodal centers representing distinct interests to participate collectively. After such events, each node reverts to its original and individual condition.

Post-modern revolutions

In 1986, President Marcos was overthrown in what has been described as the first electronic revolution. More recently, the replacement of President Estrada in 2001 has been described as a *coup-d'text* (Perterra et al., 2002). For these reasons, the Philippines is a test case for assessing the political consequences of this technology. The lack of violence and the central role of the media (e.g., the press, radio, television and cell phones) characterized both these revolutions. These political events mainly consisted of a clash of hastily organized press

conferences, public announcements, televised images, rambunctious crowds, and the possibility of violence rather than its actual enactment. Ideological differences were temporarily suspended as political foes merged seamlessly into a mass celebration and grand spectacle. EDSA (the revolution against President Marcos in 1986) and EDSA 2 (the overthrow of President Estrada in 2001) consisted mainly of simulacra and spectacle. Anthropologists have described them as rituals of rebellion, characterized by displays of *communitas* and the momentary dissolution of difference (Pertierra, 2002). This rapid mobilization brought about by CMICTs generates the new phenomena of smart mobs. Other examples include the demonstrations during the U.S. Republican (2004) convention in New York. These occasions resulted in the micro-coordination of large crowds to achieve maximum political effect through the use of CMICTs.

The powers of spectacle and simulacra have been greatly enhanced by these new communicative technologies. They offer not only new realities but reinforce older ones by their capacity to simulate connectedness and coevalness. They constitute states of simultaneous presentness rarely achieved before, except during states of ritual resulting in *communitas*. CMICTs make these states of *communitas* easily and sometimes routinely achievable. They have the capacity to evoke communality even before the existence of community. They recreate *gemeinschaft* in the midst of *gesellschaft*. Or so it seems. The microcoordination of loose groups becomes a regular phenomenon of contemporary life. Such groups are often simulacra of organic community.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

A survey of 364 respondents was conducted June through August 2004 to investigate the ways in which cell phones impact on their users' lives. While the respondents consisted mainly of students from the cities of Manila, Cebu, Iloilo, Davao and Laoag (Ilocos Norte), it also included ordinary workers, rural dwellers and other community members. All informants had access to cell phones. Although this sample is not fully representative of the Philippine population, it is sufficiently general for our limited purposes. We focused in more detail on two communities, Salisi, Ilocos Norte and Hulugan, Iloilo, to find out how mobile phones were used during the recent 2004 national elections. Neither of these communities made significant use of the cell phone during the election period. This result was surprising given the mobile phone's importance in national political campaigns. It seems that face-to-face communication is still the preferred mode in rural communities for local events. Organic communities do not seem to require or benefit from the microcoordinating capacities of the cell phone.

In the context of a functioning local community, with its dense network of multiple ties, the importance of the cell phone seems to diminish. Its main role in transmitting local information is only part of a broader system of communication encompassing consociation, gossip, rumor, ritual, and more traditional structures of communication.

In the survey, we explored whether and how people use mobile phones to extend existing social relationships. The facility in extending one's social network using these technologies may be an important factor in constituting networks of intimacy across space. These new networks of intimacy enable the creation of new forms of subjectivity. The cell phone is an ideal medium for the extension and exploration of new subjectivities outside the constraints of

everyday face-to-face life. In particular, we are interested in exploring whether notions of individualism and cosmopolitanism are encouraged by the use of cell phones. If so, what are the consequences for networks of intimacy?

Not surprisingly, mostly young respondents (aged 14-23; 50%) use the mobile phone to expand their circle of relationships. A significant number do so as a result of mis-sent messages. More men use the mobile phone to extend their friendship network than do women. While some informants use mis-sent messages to extend their social networks, many informants resent receiving text messages from strangers. This resentment may be due to factors such as class and status. Interclass networks appear to be as unusual in the cyber world as they are in the physical world. Informants who expand their networks do so mostly for fun and to involve people from outside their local areas. Older users generally are less likely to exploit the opportunities to expand networks of intimacy using these communications technologies.

Most respondents claim that they are truthful to their virtual friends and this is particularly so among older informants. Young respondents do not consider virtual friends as good as “real” friends but older respondents do so. For most respondents, personal problems are the main topic of discussion with virtual friends but young users also discuss topics such as love and sex. Most respondents are interested in meeting virtual friends.

About half of our informants who cultivate virtual friendships end up meeting them face-to-face, mostly just to hang out but occasionally to date and have sex. These virtual friends often become real friends, especially among older informants. The text services most often used are “Text God” (a service involving biblical quotes), news services and games. This indicates that cell phones are seen as sites for religious communication, indicating that authentic and even spiritual relationships are possible in cyber-reality, and as reliable sources of information as well as entertainment. Government services are rarely accessed through texting by our informants.

Cell phone use in Salisi, Ilocos Norte and Hulugan, Iloilo

Salisi and Hulugan are rural municipalities that have many of their members as overseas workers. Mobile phones have become a common feature of local life as a consequence of the absence of many of its adult population. While not totally typical, these municipalities represent a major element of Filipino rural society.

Salisi is a fifth-class municipality in Ilocos Norte. The following data was collected in two barangays [villages]: Langi is in the municipal center, while Barikir is an outlying barangay.

Barangay Langi

Number of households surveyed: 236

Number of households with cell phones: 119

50% of households have cell phones.

Ratio of cell phone/household is 1.2.

Cell phones in Langi are often shared but individual use is growing significantly. While there may be more than one cell phone in the household, practical constraints such as “no load” or “low batt” often require sharing with other household members. Of 32 informants who provided information on usage from households with cell phones, 24 (75%) reported exclusive

use while 8 (25%) shared cell phone use. These figures more likely indicate ownership rather than exclusive use since most informants indicate a willingness to allow others to use their cell phones.

In comparison to the above, when customers in an e-load facility (users renew their load capacities at this facility) were asked about usage, the results were as follows: 18 (38%) reported exclusive use of the cell phone while 53 (62%) allowed the reading of and responding to messages by other members of the household. When they were asked who owned the cell phone, 61 (85%) reported individual ownership while 10 (15%) were family owned.

These results indicate that ownership and usage are not always congruent. Indeed, the Philippines has a culture in which household members generally share resources. Therefore, when we tried to reconcile the differences in the data between that gathered in the survey of the households and that at the e-facility, we concluded that this incongruity can be explained in part by a misinterpretation by the household survey respondents regarding ownership and usage. It is quite possible that some the 75% of that household study who claimed exclusive usage in fact meant that they own their own phone, even if they allow other family members to use it from time to time. This assessment of the data needs to be confirmed through additional research in Barangay Langi. Nevertheless, in a culture where household members generally share resources, the rate of exclusive and personal use of mobile phones indicates that new patterns of individualism may be emerging.

Barangay Barikir

Number of households surveyed: 127

Numbers of cellular phone users interviewed: 66

50 % of households have cell phones.

Ratio of cell phone/household is 0.9.

Of the 66 informants with cell phones, 25 (30%) reported individual or exclusive use while 41 (70%) reported shared use. These figures when compared with Langi, (38%) and (62%) respectively, indicate that about a third of cell phone users do so individually, while two thirds share its use. In Barikir the most frequent users of cell phones are between 20 and 39 years old (50%). Moreover, people with a college education tend to use the cell phone twice as often as other members of the community. The average cost for cell phones is about P300 monthly (mostly spent texting), representing about 5% of household income. Most users receive and send 10 texts a day.

At least 39% of respondents have utilized cellular phones to make new friends. This figure is likely to be underreported since many informants were clearly hesitant to admit making new friends through texting in the presence of family members. Of those who had cyber-friends, 12% admitted meeting them personally. They often obtain the numbers of virtual friends through other friends or relatives. For example, a woman working in Italy obtained the number of a friend's son who lived in Ilocos. She became his textmate, and eventually married him. Another common way of extending friendship networks is by sending or receiving random messages, such as "May I be your textmate?" These exchanges are often expressed in a mixture of Ilocano, Tagalog and English. A 50-year-old man met a young woman from the Bicol region through a mis-sent message. They became friends and exchanged texts for months thereafter. Much less commonly, people text numbers found in magazines advertisements.

Hulugan, a rural municipality in Iloilo

(Data gathered in a barangay in the municipal center.)

Number of households surveyed: 94

Number of households with cell phones: 71

75% of households have cell phones

Ratio of cell phone/household 1.4

Cell phone use during the elections

Cell phones did not play a major role during the local elections in Salisi. Candidates and their supporters preferred to use more traditional ways of courting peoples' votes, such as face-to-face meetings and political rallies. However, the cell phone was important in coordinating the movements of candidates and their supporters as well as keeping a close watch on the activities of opposition members. Events such as weddings, baptisms, burials, and senior citizens meetings always draw large crowds and candidates made sure that they were present. The cell phone played an important role in keeping track of these activities and in passing on the information to relevant parties. This often involves microcoordination since these occasions draw their crowds in sporadic ways. Candidates had to be aware of when to turn up to ensure maximum exposure to potential voters and to avoid a possible confrontation with rivals. I was present at a necrological service where a local candidate addressed the bereaved family in the traditional manner and finished his speech with instructions on how to vote.

The results above indicate that local communities still rely principally on face-to-face communication for practical information. The organizational potential of cell phones is not significant in communities whose members are still in regular consociation. This consociation generates dense networks of exchange where the value of information is highly contextualized. Voting patterns in local communities are not a function of simple information communicated by cell phones but require more complex interactions available only in face-to-face exchanges.

Since provincial and national elections were also taking place, candidates used the cell phone to keep in touch with party headquarters in order to arrange local visits for national politicians. Information from Manila and Laoag about the elections was frequently relayed through texting, particularly for spreading rumors and other general information. Rumors and scatological information spread quickly in local communities. The cell phone simply provides the initial impulse.

Interview with Mr. Carlos Talaman

Candidate Municipal Councilor, 36 years old

(Mr. Talaman is a peasant leader of the Hulugan United Peasant Alliance).

Q: How useful was the cell phone to your candidacy in the last elections?

It was not very useful because in Hulugan there are "blind spots" where there is no signal. So I was not able to maximize the use of my cell phone.

Q: What about your party mates? Did they get in touch with each other by cell phone? Not that often. We contacted each other if there were scheduled meetings in barrios during our campaign. We also texted our campaign leaders. We were able to monitor the moves of the other political group through our cell phones.

Q: What about during the counting of votes and early results? We did not use our cell phones extensively because we assigned motorcycle “runners” in various precincts. They gave us more accurate information.

Q: What is the advantage of owning a cell phone? Now I can get in touch with my family, though, it’s costly, P300.00. So I try to stretch its use for more a month. I limit my calls only to important matters. It’s also easier to contact other organizers and to gather members for important meetings at short notice.

Interview with Mr. Armie F. Almero

Bayan Muna Party Coordinator, Province of Antique, 37 years old
(Bayan Muna is a leftist party that is often the victim of political harassment.)

Q: Do you have any plans to acquire a new cell phone? Yes. I want the new Erickson with built-in camera. My job requires me to take pictures of disasters and using them to write funding proposals for relief and rehabilitation. My need for a cell phone with a camera is job related. With my job, I often make voice calls rather than send texts. Texting is not enough. It’s difficult for me to fully explain and for our clients to comprehend text messages.

Q: Do you allow your family members to use your cell phone? No, never. Each of us has a cell phone, though there are times when they allow me to use their cell phones. They text me a load [the electronic transfer call credit]. Sometimes I course my calls through their cell phones. My office often checks on me from time to time for decisions and questions, also to verify my whereabouts.

Q: As coordinator of Bayan Muna party list, how useful was your cell phone in the last elections? Earlier, I was assigned as a municipal coordinator but later as provincial coordinator of Antique. One can’t be a provincial coordinator without a cell phone with good features, with extra battery and enough load. With cell phones, our work was easily systematized during elections. The set up was like this: various municipal coordinators forward reports to me and I pass them on to the national office of Bayan Muna in Manila as well as our regional office in Iloilo City.

Q: Earlier, in the campaign, how useful was your cell phone? I used it to contact the 18 municipalities of Antique province. Our party list coordinators in these municipalities usually prepared the ground for orientation

and chapter-building activities. When they contacted us, we were ready to proceed to towns prepared for such activities.

Distances between towns of Antique are considerable. With cell phones we can coordinate our schedules effectively. Moreover, supporters can quickly inform us regarding “black propaganda” thrown against Bayan Muna—and there were such cases. We, who were at the provincial level in San Jose, reacted by contacting local radio stations. During the campaign period, the quickness in responding to issues was of crucial importance.

Cell phones also “secure” our coordinators in a game of psy-war. Our political opponents with bad intentions are less likely to harm our members knowing how quickly we can react. An example was in San Remegio where our coordinators were threatened. Using our cell phones, other members quickly responded and came to the rescue. I can easily monitor the movements of my coworkers, their locations and arrival times at our staff house. I am responsible for their safety.

We also made use of chain-texts during the campaign. An example was the news from a GSIS (government insurance institution) insider who disclosed that President Arroyo withdrew 50 million pesos to be used in elections. We often cited this in our public meetings around the province and passed these texts to other people.

Q: Did you receive news and instructions from Bayan Muna national office through your cell phone?

Yes. News about the killing of our campaign leader in Quezon province reached us. We were informed to take precautions, usually for coordinators in far-flung parts of the province. We were also warned about cheating taking place mostly at the municipal level and so to be extra watchful and vigilant. As provincial coordinator, I passed these news and instructions to municipal coordinators.

Q: In the campaign period and during the canvassing of votes, was the cell phone very useful?

Yes. Antique is a backward place with limited landline connections—our staff house at San Jose is still without a landline. In these circumstances our cell phones were essential. Although there are now three telephone companies servicing San Jose, they have not expanded outside the capital. Meanwhile, we have our cell phones.

These two examples indicate the varied use of cell phones for elections. Localities are still sufficiently dense and reliable information is best transmitted directly. But occasions arise when rapid communication takes precedence and cell phones become crucial in its transmission. Local organizations with national structures benefit most from cell phones since they must maintain communications across dispersed networks.

Case Studies

Interview with James Guerrero

BS Architecture student, 20 years old
Poblacion, Hulugan, Iloilo venue

I got my cell phone this year, given to me by my parents.

Q: Do you really need a cell phone?

Yes, it helps with my school assignments and coordinated group work. With it, I can communicate with my classmates. I can also call my parents in Hulugan from Iloilo City.

Q: Do your parents check on you using the cell phone?

Yes, once in a while, but not always.

Q: What are the personal uses of your cell phone?

I trade texts with my barkadas [gangmates]. We text about basketball games and our favorite teams. We banter, we discuss. In a day sometimes I can send as many as 30 text messages but not when I'm busy preparing for my exams.

I also text my teachers about class assignments. This happens when I am absent and need to know about missed lessons. I also accessed the dictionary through my cell phone. After the examinations, my classmates and I organize group outings by texting.

Q: Were there instances when members of your family used your cell phone?

No. Each of us has a cell phone. For my part, I don't mind if my parents use my cell phone, after all they pay for it. My parents also don't mind if I use their cell phone in making important calls.

Q: How do you protect the privacy of your messages?

I can hide my messages easily, put them in folders or activate a password. My parents are not aware of my cell phone's features.

Q: Were you able to make new friends through your cell phone?

There was one from Surigao del Sur. She dialed a wrong number which happened to be my phone. We became text mates; she's a disc jockey at a radio station in Surigao. Sometimes, she plays music on the radio for me. But how can I hear it? I am in Iloilo City and she is in Mindanao.

Q: How important was that experience for you?

It was a matter of luck. If someday there is a chance for us to meet, it's okay with me.

Q: What are the advantages of having a cell phone?

I get to meet a lot of people. I contact my clientele through my cell phone. I do sketching and drawing for students and teachers who need visual aids. I am doing

this sideline for a fee. Sometimes, my teachers at school recommend my name to do charcoal pencil portraits for my clientele.

James has successfully integrated the cell phone into his lifestyle as a working student. It is useful for his studies, his social network as well as for work. This functionality of cell phones across different aspects of everyday life is more significant for people like James whose interests span distinct networks than it is for locals with more limited networks. This is one reason why cell phone use, particularly in rural areas, is associated with higher education and youth.

The example above also indicates how routine the mobile phone has become for many Filipinos, including those living in rural areas. This technology has been so easily incorporated into everyday practice that life without the mobile now seems to belong to the “distant” past.

Anna and Dave

[This is a case of a textual exchange resulting from a mis-sent message. Anna mistakenly texted Dave and an exchange ensued.]

Anna: Jun, come to our place. My brother is having a birthday party. Pls text back.

Dave: Miss, I think you sent your message to the wrong person. By the way, I'm Dave of Cubao. I'm 27 years old.

Anna: I'm sorry to bother you. I am Anna from Cainta. I'm working here in Sta. Lucia Mall. I'm 22 years old. Where are you working Dave? What's your real name?

Dave: Dave Sanchez, I work near Ali Mall. If you won't mind me asking, do you already have a boyfriend?

Anna: Yes, but he's been working in Saudi Arabia for two years now. I'm sorry but I have to do something.

Dave: Okay, always take care of yourself. Don't forget to pray to God everyday. Can we be textmates?

Anna: Ok, but you can only reach me at night. I usually turn off my cell phone at work. Ok, take care also.

[The following day]

Anna: Why did you text? It's already late.

Dave: I'm just bored and I can't sleep. Why are you still up, you should be sleeping.

Anna: You woke me up with your text. I have to wake up early tomorrow because we have visitors in the office. Just try to go to sleep. Sweet Dreams!

Dave: Thanks, I'm sorry if I disturbed you. God Bless.

[The next day]

Anna: How are you, my friend?

Dave: I just finished taking a shower. I'm ironing clothes.

Anna: I just finished taking a shower also. We do not have work today. Do you already have a girlfriend?

Dave: I don't have a girlfriend yet. Maybe, we were taking a shower at the same time. Isn't it nice?

Anna: Why are you saying that? Well, maybe. Where is your girlfriend from? How old is she? What is she doing now?

Dave: I told you we already broke up. Don't you miss the thing you did with your boyfriend?

Anna: Yes, I miss it a lot. But there's nothing that I can do. Life is just like that.

Dave: I also miss the things that I did with my ex-girlfriend.

Anna: You're rude.

Dave: Would you like to have sex text with me? We can do it to have fun together.

[The text exchanges that followed describe detailed sexual activities by both partners, culminating in orgasm. The text exchange continues.]

Anna: That was good.

Dave: I hope we can do it again.

Anna: You're so horny, we just finished doing it. The next time I hope it's the real thing.

Dave: What!! You told me we'll just be doing it through texting. You're the one who's horny. Ok, I'm running out of text load. Thanks take care always.

How common are such text exchanges in difficult to assess, although most of our informants have admitted receiving mis-sent messages that could have led to similar

experiences. Apart from fortuitous exchanges resulting in sex text, various cell phone service providers offer text chat rooms where one can meet people interested in friendship and companionship. Many people use these chat rooms to engage in sex text.

In addition, there are several television channels that offer 24 hour texting services to their viewers. People send messages that are displayed on the television screen. Most of these messages are exchanges of information among friends or about common interests such as music, sport, and fashion but others are explicit invitations for sexual trysts.

Cristina

28 years old, married

former member of a rock band

Presently, I just have a dial-up Internet service and a cell phone. On average I use a P300 load monthly but when I have a hectic schedule I use more. I usually ask my friends to use my landline since I don't like texting.

I have agoraphobia so I can't leave the house. The cell phone and the Internet are my main links to the outside world. But they aren't enough. I enjoyed shopping for clothes, going to the supermarket and doing other normal things. Since I don't have a credit card, I only have a limited range of things I can buy online. Many things are not listed; for example I can't buy French mustard online.

I used to get very depressed about my illness. I felt isolated, misunderstood and guilty about not living a normal life, like playing music and enjoying married life. Friends text me about where and what bands are performing in Manila. I know what people are wearing when they go to parties, about the new spas in Boracay and the latest ways of being cool. Knowing all this makes me feel much better, less isolated and more hopeful.

I am estranged from my family but keep in touch with a younger sister. She sends me text messages but I ask her to use the landline so we can have a proper conversation. I receive information about my mother's health and other family news. I often receive messages on my cell phone like, "Let's be friends," or "Can we be textmates?" I ignore them, but if they keep texting, I tell them to drop dead. I don't know why but I don't trust these messages.

Since my daughter attends school, I often check the weather by cell phone to find out if classes are cancelled. I usually text people to call me on my landline because cell phone reception is often bad. Or sometimes I text my husband to find out if he'll be late coming home—just boring domestic matters. On average, I probably send about 10 texts a day. My texts are about practical matters. I don't send greetings. But sometimes my husband is away from home for days. He takes care of visiting performers. During such times I get very lonely and send him messages like, "I miss you and hope you're doing well." Yucky love stuff like that. But it takes me a long time to send these messages since I am a slow texter. I also send practical message like, "When are you coming home?" If I want him to call me I make a missed call, and if there is an emergency I text him 911. This is our code.

In an earlier study (Pertierra, et al., 2002, p. 47-48), we provided several examples of the capacity of cell phones to lessen the feelings of isolation encountered in contemporary society. Following several articles on clinical depression featured in a major Philippine newspaper, readers sent supportive texts about their own problems. These messages generated a community of therapeutic discourse, mainly by text, among the readers.

The anonymity and intimacy provided by texting encourage self-disclosures that could be seen as threatening in other contexts. It is this capacity for generating discourses of intimacy that allows the exploration of hitherto nondiscursive identities such as clinical depression. These new discourses also assist in the development of other identities, such as the sexualized or religious subject.

Buddy

29 years old, has a live-in partner
is active in local music scene

Sometimes I don't check my email regularly, particularly when I'm on vacation. I heard there's a way you can do it using your cell phone but I haven't done it yet. Having no signal for my cell phone is much more important since I usually have to make urgent calls or texts. Once I was stopped by the police and when I tried to ring my lawyer, discovered that there was no signal. I cursed loudly.

I use my cell phone often, particularly to communicate with my girlfriend. I prefer to text unless it's really important, then I make a voice call. My texts are usually functional like, "I'll meet you later," or "Where are you now?" I also use texts for my business. I have my cell phone number on my card and prefer people to initially text me their queries. Texting not only saves money but works better than voice calls in areas with poor reception.

I am more dependent on the cell phone than on the Internet. The cell phone is just so convenient for people on the move like me. With a cell phone you are always in contact no matter where and when. But when there's no signal or your battery is low then it's a real problem. When I first went to Boracay, there was no signal in the area. At first, I felt really annoyed but slowly adjusted to the situation and before long actually enjoyed being out of contact. I started feeling "Wow, shit no cell phone," then, "Fuck it, just turn it off." I was there for a month and really enjoyed not being bothered by calls or texts. So, while I can live without a cell phone, I choose to live with it. Not having one is not the end of the world but it's an awful hassle.

For my cell phone I still use prepaid. It also has internet access like WAP but I'm not too familiar with this function. I use my cell phone everyday for both personal and business matters. I even text when I'm driving. I send my business cards through text. I also use the infrared function. This allows you to send free texts to people nearby who also have the infrared function.

At times I prefer voice calls. When I need an immediate answer or have to relay complex details, than I make a voice call. At other times, when I don't particularly like to talk to the person, I just send a text. Some of my relatives are very curious about my private life, so I just text them to avoid direct conversations. Cell phones facilitate but sometimes also prevent effective

communications. I can ward off inquisitive relatives by sending them short and noncommittal texts. I send about 50 texts daily and sometimes more. I also frequently send texts to friends abroad.

I think the cell phone has greatly facilitated connectivity. Both voice calls and texting now allow us to contact people anywhere, anytime. But this connectivity can also be used negatively, to prevent real communication. My friends and I often use it to not communicate with inquisitive relatives. It's so much easier to lie, particularly by texting. Children can deliberately misinform their parents about their location and activities. There is also the serious problem of text gambling. This fad is very popular among students and has recently made headlines. Students are easily tempted to gamble by texting and many of them get into very serious trouble because of this. I know 14-year-olds who are addicted to text gambling.

I've heard of people who use texting to court their partners even before meeting them. It's like chat rooms. I don't think such relationships will last. You might end up meeting a stalker. This must be for desperate people who have no other way of establishing relationships. I do send my girlfriend texts saying that I love her and we often exchange emotional messages but I would never do this with others. I really hate it when I receive texts like, "Hi, can I be your textmate?" Shit, I don't even know them. I never respond but if they persist I bar their numbers. I am tempted at times to ask them how they got my number but that would probably only encourage further exchanges.

I still remember when I had a pager. That was a big help but nothing compared to a cell phone. I would now find it very difficult to manage without one. My life is so dependent on instant communication that I would have to drastically rearrange it in order to manage without the cell phone. It does happen that some people are not contactable either because you've lost their number or they have lost their cell phone.

Cell phones make life more convenient but other things remain basically the same. I don't think one is necessarily less connected without the cell phone but people increasingly think so. They think, "Now I can contact my friends and relatives." It makes them feel more connected but I'm not sure if it improves their life.

I'm more likely to respond to texts about work than personal matters except my girlfriend. Often I don't bother to answer texts from friends or family. If they persist I simply deny receiving their earlier texts. But work related texts are more important and I always try to respond to them quickly. Whenever I have misunderstanding with friends or relatives, I prefer to text my explanations. You can compose your texts carefully, without interruptions, and make your points clearly. You are more objective and less emotional than when using voice calls. I easily lose my temper when I use voice calls in dealing with difficult emotional issues.

Melanie

28 years old, married to a Filipino cameraman
an American expatriate reporter

The cell phone has affected my life significantly, especially in relation to my Filipino family. The cell phone helps smooth out relationships in the family. My brother-in-law recently sent me a text: "Hi mel, I am very shy telling you this but no one can help me, only the two of you. I don't have any money to support my kids for their daily needs as of now." We've helped him a lot in the past, but now we are preparing for our own expenses because of the baby. Texting this request is much less awkward than making a voice call. The last time he asked my husband for help it created much trouble in the family. Using texting I can respond carefully and not give offense. In this way texting helps maintain family relationships by avoiding difficult situations or being able to deal with them more sensitively.

Cell phones and the Internet are great enablers. They allow you to stay in a social and information loop or network. For example, last Friday I decided to invite some friends to watch a movie I had just downloaded from the Net. I texted my friends in Makati and Quezon City and 15 of them turned up on Sunday. Some of them didn't know one another and so they exchanged cell phone numbers when they met at my place. The next day I helped one of them search for a new apartment that had been suggested by another guest. All of this would have been much harder to organize without texting and the Internet. I don't have time for five telephone calls but I can easily send 15 text messages.

I have a P750 Globe plan for my cell phone but often pay more, about P1000. I prefer calling rather than texting. During the day I send texts so as not to intrude at work but in the evenings I make more voice calls. I don't particularly watch my phone when at home but occasionally look at it when I pass by. I use the clock in my cell phone particularly when I was timing my contractions. I also use the alarm clock and the calculator and occasionally use it to write down notes. But my cell phone was really important during the election period. I made many voice calls and send countless texts. My mobile phone bill was over P4000. I often interviewed candidates by telephone but would often first send them a text message asking if I could talk to them. This was a real ice-breaker, particularly if I didn't know them. I would provide them with enough information via text and would follow it up with a voice call. People are also more likely to read a text from a stranger rather than accept a voice call particularly if they are busy in the middle of an election campaign. They often store the message and contact you later.

I think I'm less dependent on my cell phone than other people. I don't pay much attention to it when I'm home and don't feel compelled to immediately answer every text I receive. I try to maintain a certain etiquette and formality even when texting. My texts are usually very functional and rarely send greetings just for the sake of it. I feel intruded upon if mere acquaintances were to do that to me. During Christmas time in the Philippines I often get annoyed when people send me greetings. I know they expect you to respond and I would rather spend that time enjoying the occasion. But my husband feels very differently and gets excited whenever he gets a text message. I guess there is a major cultural

difference here. Yet my husband often asks me to send text messages for him. But he always likes receiving and sending holiday greetings. My life, both as a journalist and an expatriate, would be very difficult without the cell phone and the Internet. These technologies not only affect my efficiency but as importantly, enable me to maintain social relationships locally as well as overseas. It makes communication much easier. Life today requires constant communication at work and for social survival.

These last three examples are not meant to reflect typical users of mobile phones but rather to indicate the range of existing users. Cristina is clearly more depended on this technology than most, given her medical condition, but her use of it is nevertheless common. Melanie is privileged both by her professional and cultural background but her example illustrates how easily she has adapted it to her expatriate status. Her Filipino husband, despite coming from a far less privileged background is equally adept at adjusting his life around this new technology. Buddy leads a fast and varied lifestyle. The mobile phone allows him to navigate through the unpredictable demands of business and pleasure. Once more these examples indicate how ordinarily but essentially mobile phones have become for Filipinos.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results above, we can draw certain conclusions. The first observation is the pervasiveness of mobile phones even in rural areas of the Philippines. The cell phone has joined earlier commodities such as radio and television in most Filipino homes. But the mobile phone has achieved this level of penetration much faster than was the case for radio and television. The average household ownership rate of mobile phones in the rural municipalities we investigated varies from .9 to 1.4. In other words, most if not all households have a cell phone. The rates in urban communities are much higher, probably approaching 2 cell phones per household. Admittedly, since these figures are averages, they do not reveal existing inequalities in access to communication media. Compared to other domestic goods, the mobile phone has enjoyed the quickest rate of diffusion in Philippine households (Pertierra, 2003). Cell phone ownership is becoming a major index of modernity and the basis for a new form of inequality. The increase in cell phone theft now demonstrates that its possession has become an imperative.

The attitude towards CMICTs is generally very favorable, particularly for cell phones. However, there are some qualifications about CMICTs, particularly when their usage is abused. Cell phone theft has become a leading criminal problem and electronic gambling has raised some concerns, especially among the youth. Online gaming increasingly takes up more of people's time, possibly affecting more useful activities. Virtual relationships are becoming more common and while many are advantageous, others may be disruptive. The cost of CMICTs has become a concern in most families with limited incomes. Cell phones, despite their relatively low costs, are now a major expense for many families. Costs are estimated to be about P300 per month or 5% of average income.

However, the communicational advantages of mobile phones far exceed its disadvantages. Some people may spend more money and time using their mobiles than is advisable but the gains are easily recognized. Parents can maintain contact with children;

friends can exchange practical information and share affective ties. The cell phone is used for entertainment as well as a source for news. It also provides opportunities for extending networks of intimacy. The mobile phone is particularly useful for people overseas to maintain contact with their village kin. It allows them to enjoy an absent presence. This enables mothers in Hong Kong to participate in daily decision making for their families in Ilocos. They text detailed instructions as to how remittances are to be used and offer advice on families problems. In this case, cell phones don't just connect; they also mediate and shape relationships (Katz, 2003). Children can text their mother questions they would not normally ask in her presence.

Texting has become the major use of cell phones for most Filipinos (Lallana, 2004). Presently Filipinos send over 200 million texts daily, about 10 texts per user. This contrasts with Europeans who send about 3 texts daily (Ling, 2004). However, the latter are moving from SMS to MMS, as Europeans upgrade their mobile phones to include multiple functions such as cameras and Internet connections. While these advanced cell phones are also present in the Philippines, their numbers are presently negligible.

Texting is a cheap and effective way to relay basic information. Its informal nature also lends itself to novel uses, from sending greetings, to initiating friendships, to mending misunderstandings. Texts are also effective devices for eudemonic purposes. They are sources of pleasure, from sending and receiving picture greetings to making seductive propositions. Sex jokes are extremely common and are often exchanged even between parents and children. Texting combines the informality of oral communication with the reflexiveness of writing. It fuses the saying with the said (Ricoeur, 1971). Most Filipinos enjoy this conflation, but some find it corny and intrusive.

There are slight gender and age differences in the use of mobile phones. We strongly suspect that there are also class differences but will have to investigate this in the future. Men are more likely than women to use the cell phone to explore new relationships. These relationships tend to be local, whereas women prefer to initiate new relationships outside their locality. Older users are more likely to be truthful to their interlocutors than younger users, who exploit the medium's capacity for subterfuge. Men are more interested in using cell phones to initiate sexual liaisons, whereas women tend mainly to discuss personal problems. As a consequence, men are more likely to meet their hitherto unknown interlocutors than are women.

Contrary to expectations, cell phones often encourage authentic relationships. They expand networks of intimacy more readily than opportunities for subterfuge or seduction. They are seen as providing reliable knowledge. Many people depend on cell phones for the news as well as for entertainment. Services such as Text God are simply one indication of the medium's capacity to elicit deeply personal and interior experiences.

We were surprised by the relatively rare use of cell phones for local elections. While in some cases this was due to poor signal coverage, other factors also intervened. Local communities prefer face-to-face interactions and direct communication is often still the best way to achieve one's goals. But the cell phone was employed for coordinating purposes, particularly to surveil the actions of opponents.

However, for national organizations such as Bayan Muna, whose members are often the victims of political harassment, the cell phone proved invaluable. Not only were they able to coordinate activities spread throughout the province but they were also able to communicate with other media, like radio, to counteract the accusations of their opponents. The personal

safety of many of their members was greatly improved by being able to communicate effectively with one another.

In Melanie's case the cell phone proved invaluable not only to contact her election-related informants but as importantly to mediate relationships with strangers. In the midst of an election campaign, people respond more favorably to text inquiries from strangers than to voice calls. Texting allowed Melanie to initiate a virtual acquaintanceship with potential informants before embarking on more direct communication.

This chapter has briefly examined the consequences of cell phones on notions of individualism and cosmopolitanism. We assume that CMICTs encourage their users to extend and particularize their notions of agency and subjectivity. Cell phones, in particular, often shift from being mobile to being personal devices. Mobility often involves the personalization of technology to suit people's varied lifestyles. Such lifestyles require greater facilities in communication for maintaining coherent and stable relationships. Hence, mobility and individualization are inverse sides of contemporary life. The mobile phone encapsulates this dyadic relationship; it expresses the tempo of the times; it's apparatusgeist (Katz & Aakhus, 2002).

Several of our informants indicated that they valued the privacy afforded by the cell phone but generally most people shared its usage. The technology has the potential of significantly expanding its users' network of intimacy. This particularization has effects on identity construction. But in many rural households, the cell phone is used by all members of the household, much like the telephone.

The cell phone encourages an exploration of the world beyond its local boundaries. The increasingly individual use of cell phones as reported by our informants encourages them to develop notions of individualism relatively free from earlier collective constraints. Hence young people can cultivate friendships with people whom their parents may not normally approve of. As we saw from the interviews, even older informants from rural villages take advantage of this opportunity to expand their network of intimacy.

All these examples simply reaffirm what has become obvious in our research: mobile phones have become thoroughly incorporated into most Filipinos' lives. For some, it is used mainly to improve an acute lack in communication structures such as contacting family, friends or work colleagues. For them, CMICTs make it possible to participate in contemporary life, with its spatial separations or temporal adjustments. For others, CMICTs are more crucial for their personal and professional lives since their identities are primarily dependent on it. Cristina, Buddy and Melanie are good examples of the latter but so is James in Iloilo. In all these cases CMICTs are centrally important. A major use of CMICTs is not just to keep in touch but also to generate social and cultural capital. As an informant puts it, "Life today requires constant communication at work and for social survival."

REFERENCES

- Castells, M., & Himanen, P. (2002). *The information society and the welfare state*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Katz, J. (Ed.). (2003). *Bodies, machines, and communication contexts: What is to become of us? Machines that become us: The social context of personal communication technology* (pp. 311-319) New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Katz, J., & Aakhus, M. (Eds.). (2002) *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk, public*

- performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kirby, V. (1997). *Telling flesh: The substance of the corporeal*. London: Routledge.
- Kuvaja, K., & Mursu, A. (2003). ICTs, equality and sustainable development: Experiences from the Philippines and Nigeria, *Pilipinas*, 40, 55-71.
- Lallana, E. (2004). *SMS in business and government in the Philippines*. Manila, the Philippines: DOST.
- Ling, R. (2004). *The mobile connection*. Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Morgan Kaufmann Publishers.
- Pertierra, R., Ugarte, E. F., Pingol, A., Hernandez, J., & Dacanay, N. L. (2002). *TXT-ING Selves: Cellphones and Philippine modernity*. Manila, the Philippines: De La Salle University Press.
- Pertierra, R. (2002). *The work of culture*. Manila, the Philippines: De La Salle University Press.
- Pertierra, R. (2003). *Science, technology and the culture of everyday life in the Philippines*. Manila, the Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University.
- Ricoeur, P. (1971). The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as a text. *Social Research*, 38, 329-362.
- Rheingold, H. (2002). *Smart mobs*. Cambridge, MA: Basic Books.
- Warschauer M. (2004). *Technology and social inclusion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization. (2004). Retrieved March 31, 2005 from <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/airglobalization/index.htm>
- World Summit on the Information Society. (2005). Retrieved March 31, 2005 from <http://www.itu.int/wsis/>
-

Author's Note

I thank Itaru Nagasaka for providing research data from the Barangay Barikir used in this study.

All correspondence should be addressed to:

Raul Pertierra
Asian Center
University of the Philippines
Diliman, Q.C. PHILIPPINES
raul_p29@pltdsl.net