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TOWARDS A SOCIOLOGY OF THE MOBILE PHONE

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Abstract *Use of the mobile phone is an immensely significant social and cultural phenomenon. However, market hype and utopian dreams greatly exaggerate its importance. The fundamental issue for sociology is the process of change. Bound up with contemporary issues of change, the mobile phone is a prime object for sociological attention both at the macro and micro levels of analysis. This article considers the strengths and weaknesses of four methods for studying the sociality of the mobile phone (social demography; political economy; conversation, discourse and text analysis; and ethnography), the different kinds of knowledge they produce, and the interests they represent. Recent ethnographic research on the mobile phone, particularly motivated by issues around the uncertain transition from 2G to the 3G technology, has examined the actual experience of routine use. Interpretative research is now supplementing purely instrumental research, thereby giving a much more nuanced understanding of mobile communications. Critical research on the mobile phone, of which there is little, is beginning to ask skeptical questions that should be pursued further.*

Keywords: *instrumental research, interpretative research, critical research, ethnography, Apparatgeist.*

INTRODUCTION

To begin, I would like you to consider this quotation from Howard Rheingold's celebration of the cooperative properties of person-to-person wireless communications, *Smart Mobs*:

> On January 20, 2001, President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines became the first head of state in history to lose power to a smart mob. More than 1 million Manila residents, mobilized and coordinated by waves of text messages, assembled at the site of the 1986 "People Power" peaceful demonstrations that had toppled the Marcos regime. (Rheingold, 2002, p. 157)

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Do you notice anything odd about that statement? Rheingold is illustrating the value of mobile telephony in organizing popular protest with reference to the overthrow of Estrada in 2001. Yet he underlines this point by reference to a much earlier and comparable event in 1986 when, presumably, mobile phones had not played a significant role in mobilizing the masses.

That's one example; here's another. My 18-year-old daughter and my 21-year-old son find social life virtually inconceivable without a mobile phone. Maintaining a friendship network and arranging meetings would be just too much hassle without the mobile. Yet, when I was 18 or 21, I had friends too and, somehow, I managed to meet up with them.

I make these observations merely to reflect upon how a recent luxury has become a current necessity and to register a note of skepticism concerning the allegedly transformational capacities of newer information and communication technologies. Commercial hype and utopian anarchism, to my mind, mystify rather than illuminate the significance of the mobile phone. Which is not to say it is insignificant. The mobile phone is an immensely significant social and cultural phenomenon.

At the beginning of his book, *Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone*, Jon Agar (2003) smashes up his mobile phone to scrutinize what it contains. The raw materials in its many components are culled from around the world, such as nickel for the battery from Chile, microprocessors and circuitry from the USA. Petroleum for the plastic casing, molded, say, in Taiwan, and for the LCD (liquid crystal display) comes from somewhere like the Persian Gulf, the North Sea, Russia or Texas. The rare metal tantalum, essential for capacitors that store electrical charges, comes, most likely, from the aboriginal lands of Western Australia or the Democratic Republic of Congo. During the 1990s the price of tantalum per pound shot up from US$30 to $300. Columbite-tantalite (coltan), mined in the North East of Congo, is a source of civil war over mineral rights and the revenue from its mining continues to fund hostilities there. This process is one way of defamilarizing what has become a very familiar object over the past few years.

The mobile phone is not reducible only to a material object, a commodity circulating in the global economy of transnational operations, of course; it is also a means of communication with considerable social and cultural significance. For some users, the sign value of this object might actually exceed its use value, functioning as a magical fetish, which is certainly the message of much advertising. The mobile is a symbol in itself, an obscure object of desire and a sign of the times. Early efforts have been made to map out a general sociology of the mobile phone (Geser, 2003; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). This paper has no such comprehensive ambition. The following notes towards a possible sociology of the mobile phone aim to identify key issues in theory and methodology. It is important to situate the mobile phone in relation to the sociology of change, the macro level, and everyday sociality, the micro level.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

The core subject matter of sociology is change. As a discipline, sociology emerged historically in order to make sense of modernization, to put it very summarily. Classical sociology was preoccupied with analyzing the differences between tradition and modernity. Social life was changing dramatically and sociology sought to understand and explain the emerging modern condition. Towards the end of the twentieth century, sociology returned to

its focus upon the dynamics of macro-change in making sense of the emergence of what had been called "the postmodern condition" (Lyotard, 1979/1984). Many commentators discerned a transition occurring between epochs, comparable to the shift from tradition to modernity, and named the new condition in various ways, for instance, "post-industrialism," "reflexive modernity," "global neo-liberalism," and "the information age," as well as "postmodernity." The most compelling account of epochal change at the turn of the millennium was given by Manuel Castells (1996, 1997a, 1998) in his three-volume magnum opus, *The Information Age*. The first volume is entitled *The Rise of the Network Society*. Castells places great emphasis on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in contemporary change, though it has to be said that modes of communication are integrally related to any social formation. The general argument is transhistorical. If you want to understand any kind of society you should look at how its members communicate with one another.

According to Castells (1996, 1997a, 1998), it is the complex, proliferating network principle that characterizes computer-mediated communications. Complex networking also characterizes social relations in the information age. This seemed to imply that changing social relations were an effect of technological change. Castells's thesis is vulnerable to the critique of technological determinism (Williams, 1974; Winston, 1996). On the topic of technological innovation in communications and its social impact, there are two general questions to ask. First, how do new communication technologies come about? Second, what is the relation of new technology to social and cultural change? The ideology of technological determinism awards absolute primacy to technology. It assumes a linear process of autonomous scientific discovery that is more or less swiftly applied to technical invention, resulting in smooth diffusion and eventual social transformation. When the history of any such technology is looked at closely, however, it becomes evident that a combination of cultural, economic and political determinations are involved in putting the accelerator or brake on technological innovation. Against sheer determinism, intention comes into the process, involving decisions, wise and unwise, along the way, which have unintended as well as intended consequences. Always alternative decisions could have been made that would have resulted in different outcomes and might yet still do so. However, it is in the interests of corporations in the business of developing and marketing new technologies to make extravagant claims about inevitable and beneficial effects on society and social relations.

Castells is careful to defend himself against the criticism of technological determinism. He argues that there are two other major dynamics, in addition to the information technology revolution, shaping network society. These are the three interrelated processes identified by Castells (1997b):

1. *The information technology revolution* since the 1970s (the micro-chip, desktop computers, telematics, exploitation of the Internet, etc.).
2. *The restructuring of capitalism and statism* in the 1980s (shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, globalization, collapse of communism, undermining of the welfare state and trade unionism, etc.).
3. *The cultural social movements* that emerged from the 1960s (peace, feminism, ecology, etc.).

John Urry (2000) has explored the implications of such change for sociology itself in his book, *Sociology Beyond Societies*, which is subtitled *Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*.

Urry places less emphasis on technological development than does Castells. His view is closer to Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) notion of "liquid modernity." In the late-modern world, change is about increasingly rapid movement. According to Urry (2000):

1. Sociology has neglected mobility, particularly of people, as a cardinal feature of sociality.
2. Mobility does not only refer to the movement of people but also "of other entities, of ideas, images, technologies, monies, flowing across various scapes" (Urry, 2000, p. 188).
3. The object of social analysis can no longer be conceived of as "society" in the static form of a nation state but, instead, sociology should study global flows.

Curiously, in his treatise on mobile sociology, published in the year 2000, Urry barely registers the mobile phone. There are a few passing mentions, however, such as his noting of ring tones in the social landscape: "The 1990s sound icon is the mobile phone" (Urry, 2000, p. 102). Around the turn of the millennium, then, neither Castells nor Urry saw much social significance in the mobile phone itself, except as one feature of ICT development and of a pervasive mobility in the late-modern world. This may just indicate how even the most up-to-date and far-sighted sociologists can be taken somewhat by surprise, just like everyone else.

The shift from first generation (1G) to second generation (2G) during the 1990s, from be-suited business users with their bricks on display to mass-popular use, particularly as a leisure medium for the young, was astonishing. Nobody genuinely believes that the same kind of sudden tipping point will occur in the transition from 2G to 3G, although Nokia and other companies talk it up incessantly. In the business, there has been great uncertainty over the launch and viability of third generation (3G) mobile telephony in the opening years of the twenty-first century.

In 1997, the British government commissioned a games strategy unit at University College London, led by Ken Binmore, to design an auction for the sale of 3G frequencies. This succeeded spectacularly. At the height of the dot.coms boom in 2000, five 20-year licenses were sold at a combined total of £22.5 billion to Orange, BT, One to One, Vodaphone and Hutchison (see e.g., Radiocommunications Agency, n.d.). Very soon this "license to print money" looked far from guaranteed with the collapse of financial confidence in dot.coms. Similar lucrative auctions took place in other countries with similarly shaky results. Perhaps the Finnish government was wise to give its licenses away for nothing.

Around the time of the British auction there was a health scare concerning mobile phones. Might the radiation emitted from them cause brain cancer, especially in the vulnerable young? A current public inquiry in Britain was recommending caution in the use of mobiles while the government, before publication of the Stewart report (Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones [IEGMP], 2000), leaked its findings inaccurately as providing a clean bill of health for mobile telephony.

Adam Burgess (2004) has surveyed the health issues concerning the effects of radiation in heavy use of mobile phones and proximity to the communication towers that have sprung up all over the place. Stories regularly appear in the media about the effects especially on children living close to towers, not dissimilar to stories about ill health in the locality of nuclear power stations. Public protests against the emplacement of towers have brought the issue to widespread attention. However, Burgess is skeptical of the evidence of adverse effects on health and comes to the conclusion that anxiety in this respect is unfounded because mobile telephony is not a proven health hazard.

This is a classic risk society issue where nobody really knows the long-term effects for good or ill of a massive real-life experiment on the public, the results of which may not be known for several years when it is too late for the sufferers (Beck, 1986/1992). The phone companies are acutely aware of the possible risks and have patented protective shields for mobiles. In spite of occasional media panics and much less publicized concern within the industry, however, the public is not so well informed of the potential health hazards of mobile telephony.

Anxiety over health is not what has held up a swift transition to 3G. This has more to do with business finance, building infrastructure, spiraling consumer costs and the search for a "killer application," in the unfortunate term used by the industry. The long sought after killer application, it is thought, will persuade everyone to switch from comparatively inexpensive 2G to the inevitably more expensive, yet more expansive in application, third generation multipurpose mobile device. In the meantime (writing in 2004), we have the fad of picture messaging.

QUESTIONS OF METHOD

The theories of Castells (1996, 1997a, 1998) and Urry (2000) may set the general framework for a sociology of the mobile phone but they do not prescribe how to study it. Here, it is necessary to say something about knowledge and interest. Jürgen Habermas (1968/1972) once distinguished between three kinds of knowledge interest, each in turn defined by its different research orientation.

1. Instrumental research oriented towards utility, similar to Jean–Francois Lyotard's (1979/1984) performativity principle. Lyotard argued that postmodern knowledge is not about the search for truth but, rather, for pragmatic results. This is undoubtedly the main knowledge interest and orientation of scientific research now and, most consequentially, funding and investment.
2. Interpretative research oriented towards understanding, framed by the values of mutuality irrespective of cultural differences.
3. Critical research oriented towards emancipation, that is, political amelioration of injustice.

Lyotard (1979/1984) was dismissive of both interpretative and critical research as passé, yet both can be seen in play, as well as prevalent forms of instrumental research, in sociological study of the mobile phone.

The orientations themselves do not necessarily specify methodological principles and research techniques. There are many potential ways of framing research problems and strategies regarding the mobile phone. Here, I shall identify four broad and appropriate methodologies in relation to knowledge interests.

Social demography

This is where most effort is put into data gathering, identifying the scale and range of usage in different segments of the population. It is useful to business and government. Phone companies want to know about the market, to open up new markets, and to develop products that are marketable. From a policy point of view, governments require facts and figures too.

We know, for instance, that Finland has the highest number of mobile phones per head of population in the world (Puro, 2002) and, perhaps surprisingly, the per capita use is comparatively low in the USA. That does, indeed, tell us something about culture and society in Finland, a large mass of land on the northern edge of Europe with a relatively small and dispersed population, and in the USA, where local landline telephone calls are usually free. The mobile phone and related industry is the leading element of the Finnish economy and a matter of national pride. However, generally speaking, social demography is not so much sociology in the explanatory sense but a means of description, providing evidence that may be interpreted and used according to various interests, and not necessarily the interests represented in its construction.

Political economy

The term *political economy* is used to distinguish a particular kind of research from positivistic economics. Politics and economics cannot be divorced from one another. Political economy of communications is usually critical. It looks at how corporations command the field and increasingly usurp the role of government. Typical issues, from this perspective, are media imperialism, neo-liberal communications policy, deregulation, privatization and "the digital divide" (see e.g., Schiller, 1999). Business structures and processes of mediated communication amplify economic inequality and political power relations. Even Castells (1996, 1997a, 1998) says this is so of ICT development, with sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, hugely disadvantaged. However, the Internet was also seen as a new means of communicative access. Recently, attention has shifted on to the mobile phone as the means of emancipation. It is relatively cheap to access and, for regions with poor landline telephony and digital connectedness, the mobile phone and the all-purpose communicational device are said to leap a stage of technological development.

Conversation, discourse and text analysis

Social demography is useful and political economy essential. Neither, however, has much to say about meaning. Here, we turn to various techniques of linguistic analysis. Obviously, conversation analysis is relevant. Language, however, is more than the minutiae of conversational turn taking and so on (see Schegloff, 2002). Mobile communications have discursive properties linked to social behavior in different contexts. The very design and representation of the object itself and its diverse social uses are meaningful. Then, of course, there is the surprising phenomenon of text messaging that has caught on, especially among young people, to an extent that nobody predicted. The abbreviated language of text messaging is a new kind of shorthand, which may have an impact on language generally. It is also a medium of sub-cultural identification. Many older people just can't get the hang of it.

Ethnography

This takes us into the territory of ethnography, which derives from the anthropological practice of immersion in other cultures in order to grasp and convey social reality from the point of view of "the native." This qualitative approach to studying everyday life has become popular in sociology and cultural studies where the researcher may be studying his/her own

culture and society. Seldom is research of this kind conducted with the depth of classical anthropology. There usually is not enough time and insufficient resources for such detailed research. Often the work is small-scale and brief, deploying unstructured and semi-structured interviewing and focus group techniques, and, normally to a lesser extent, observation. In practice, the selection of interviewees and groups aims to be representative but not in the statistical sense.

Ethnography is subject to criticism for being slight and unrepresentative by those who prefer large-scale sample surveys. However, qualitative research in an ethnographic mode has its own criteria of validity that are not quantitative. It is concerned with typicality, the rich texture of everyday life and fine differences of culture. When done well, this works better than attitudinal surveying and opinion polling, though qualitative and quantitative methods may complement one another and be combined together in a project. Facts and figures give a broad picture of what is going on whereas ethnography is better at representing the nuances and complexities of everyday life. Incidentally, the use of focus groups has become increasingly common in market and political research as well as in "disinterested" research.

Ethnographic Studies

Here, I shall concentrate on ethnographic research with regard to the mobile phone and its social use. I want to discuss three recent British studies of the mobile phone's social use: *Mobile UK—Mobile Phones and Everyday Life*, by James Crabtree, Max Nathan and Simon Roberts (2003); *Mobilisation—The Growing Public Interest in Mobile Technology,* by James Harkin (2003); and *On the Mobile*, by Sadie Plant (2002).

All three studies use ethnographic methods. None of them, however, can strictly speaking be regarded as "disinterested." *Mobile UK* was funded and conducted by the charity the Work Foundation, which is dedicated to research in the interests of British business (Crabtree et al., 2003). *Mobilisation* was commissioned by the British-based firm O2, and conducted by the New Labour think tank Demos (Harkin, 2003). *On the Mobile*, which can only be accessed through cyberspace, was done for Motorola, the American-based phone company (Plant, 2002).

Mobile UK

The *Mobile UK* report must be seen within the business context and anxieties around the launch and viability of 3G mobile telephony in the opening years of the twenty-first century (Crabtree et al., 2003). In effect, *Mobile UK* seeks to bring a bit of realism to the telecommunications industry. It criticizes research that gives disproportionate attention to certain groups of mobile users—"young urban professionals, mobile business people, and teenagers" (p. 6)—who are generally said to be the early adopters of newer communication technologies. *Mobile UK* is concerned, instead, with more mundane and widespread use. An earlier piece of research (Crabtree, Nathan, &. Reeves, 2002) by the same organization had distinguished between "enthusiasts," "quiet pragmatists," and "aversives" but, this later research found these categories to be less fixed and more overlapping. It is advisable, then, to explore how the mobile phone is embedded in the most typical routines of everyday life. To this end, ethnographic research is appropriate.

It must be said, however, that the ethnographies conducted for *Mobile UK* are very limited in scope. There are just four case studies of individuals and their social interactions

through mobile telephony. They are, nevertheless, insightful. The case studies are focused upon Denise, a hairdresser who is married with children; Jack, a plumber; Louise, an unemployed single mother; and Darius, an IT worker. The case study of Denise, for instance, illuminates how family relations are managed with the aid of the mobile phone, especially childcare. The case of the plumber, Jack, is also very interesting. If you have ever tried to get hold of a plumber in an emergency, knowing his/her mobile number is handy. However, Jack often has his phone turned off because he isn't short of work and doesn't want to be disturbed on the job. He is also reluctant to move on to 3G because it might suggest to his customers that he is too well off through charging them too much.

These examples may be considered merely anecdotal. Nonetheless, they do illustrate the mundane character of mobile use and redress the balance of attention from more extreme and less routinely practical uses and extravagant predictions concerning future use. *Mobile UK* stresses the practicalities of everyday life, the embeddedness of 2G in routine habits, and advises caution about the take-up of 3G (Crabtree et al., 2003). It also points to the financial realities of mobile use. With the explosion of mobile use in the late '90s it was possible to sell phones very cheaply or even give them away. Pre-pay deals were popular since they enabled people to control their expenditure on mobile telephony. It is very difficult to wean people off such deals and sensible habits, encourage them to spend much more casually, and access expensive new services.

The recommendations to the industry made by *Mobile UK* are less than amazing. It is suggested that upgraded devices should facilitate specific tasks, exploit networking, be priced reasonably, target users' mobility, and be simple to use. Thus is the wisdom revealed by instrumental, market-oriented research concerning the advent of 3G mobile telephony.

Mobilisation

The Demos report for O2, *Mobilisation,* is also anxious about take-up for 3G but its message is aimed more directly at government than business (Harkin, 2003). It displays the typical features and, indeed, contradictions of New Labour/Third Way politics. If *Mobile UK* is instrumentally market-oriented, *Mobilisation* is instrumentally government-oriented. It is more socially concerned but in what may be regarded as a patronizing and, indeed, unrealistic manner.

Mobilisation registers a certain social hostility in some quarters to the mobile phone but argues that this is largely mistaken. The full potential of mobile telephony is yet to be realized and, in this, government has a role to play. The report says that "government bodies will need to open up their intestines to mobile users" and mobilization offers "more flexible models for public service delivery" (Harkin, 2003, p. 10). The aim of the report is to issue "a wake-up call for Britain" (Harkin, 2003, p. 10).

The research conducted by Demos is rather more extensive than the Work Foundation's project. Four focus groups were studied, and ten individual users and nine experts interviewed. One of the focus groups was on the Isle of Man where O2 has been conducting a pilot study of 3G with 200 participants. Another group—in Bromley, Kent—consisted of 16- to 18-year-olds.

For regular users, the mobile phone has become a prosthetic, an extension to the body. It has several different functions already. The industry has mistakenly promoted it as a toy, thereby trivializing its actual and potential uses. Particularly important, according to *Mobilisation,* is the "declining reserves of trust in modern society" (Harkin, 2003, p. 18). The

mobile is a means of protection and a bonding device for friends and family. This is particularly so for young people: it overcomes shyness and facilitates subcultural formation through SMS (short text messaging) and shared use. Still, however, the mobile is a "locus of social anxiety" (Harkin, 2003, p. 26), particularly regarding health and crime.

Perhaps the most interesting observation made by the *Mobilisation* report is that if the Internet is about globalization, then the mobile is about localization. It tends to cement local social bonds and, with further technical development, it will be an easily usable location device, a means of orientation in place. This illustrates its capacity to do things other technologies cannot do.

Typical of Third-Way thinking, *Mobilisation* recommends the mobile's potential for marketing and customer relations while simultaneously calling for tough anti-spam laws that it admits are hard to enforce. The author of *Mobilisation*, James Harkin (2003), is also struck by the fact that in just one hour of November 2002, 200,000 votes were cast by SMS for contestants in the television program, *Popstars*. While some might see this as an instance of a popular cultural trivialization of democracy and distraction from it, not Harkin. Government should learn from the public's enthusiasm for mobile voting. Perhaps, in future, party political manifestos could be downloaded and clips from political speeches viewed in this way as well as remote voting in elections, not only in game shows.

Other political suggestions flowing from *Mobilisation* include restricting police accessing of mobile location data to cases of serious crime and terrorism, online government information accessible by mobile, and a mobile government forum for stakeholders. There has been considerable public disquiet about the location of masts and base stations. However, Harkin (2003) argues, local authorities should not be allowed to restrict such development; so much for democracy.

On the Mobile

Sadie Plant's (2002) research for Motorola, *On the Mobile*, is the most interesting of the three studies under consideration here and it is more properly sociological in a theoretical sense than the others. Plant is formerly of Birmingham and Warwick universities, now a freelance author of well-regarded books on French situationism, on women and computing, and on drugs and writing.

Her research for Motorola is an international comparative study with data from Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Peshawar, Dubai, London, Birmingham and Chicago. Plant conducted face-to-face interviews with individuals and groups. She also interviewed people by email. And, like a good social anthropologist, Plant observed behavior with the mobile phone in public places. In order to explicate her data, Plant draws on ideas from sociologists Erving Goffman (1959/1971) and David Riesman (1961/1989). In effect, she produces a fairly rich cultural analysis of mobile phone use.

The most conspicuous use of the mobile phone is in Tokyo. Mobile use is largely confined to the elite in Peshawar. Mobiles are most used in Nordic countries. And, there is a very high rate of use among the young in Britain. Otherwise, however, according to Plant, mobile use does not differ as much as you might expect from country to country.

Plant (2002) is observant of the rituals of use in public places. Being "on the mobile" in public is itself a ritual act. There are, however, different types of response to a call. Some take flight on receiving a call, that is removing themselves from the immediate social situation,

stepping outside or whatever. Others put the people they are with in suspension while they take the call. Another typical kind of response—that of persistence—occurs as well, whereby communicative interaction is maintained in copresence when simultaneously taking and making the call. Plant (2002) also distinguishes between what she names as "innie" and "outie" behavior by mobile users. Innies use their phones as unobtrusively as possible whereas outies integrate phone conversation into the situation of copresence. These different kinds of response and habitual behavior are associated with complex rules of etiquette that have developed around mobile phone use. For instance, Plant compares formal restaurant and informal café situations in England. Mobile phone use is often banned in formal situations and, in any case, people tend to keep their phones turned off or use them very unobtrusively in smart restaurants. The hubbub of an informal café includes the placing of phones on tables and a great deal of mobile chatter.

Differences between masculine and feminine behavior are noticeable, though not always as sharply different as might be expected. There is a tendency for men to show off more with their phones—stage phoning—and there tends to be a certain competitiveness between men, particularly with the alpha male's newer model on display. The young in general—both male and female—also tend to be concerned with the fashionable value of the phone. Women tend to be more discrete, usually with their phones tucked away in bags, except that is for single women in public places who are apt to display and use the mobile as a kind of protective device.

There are sets of stances, gestures and body movements associated with the phone. Plant distinguishes between "speakeasy" and "spacemaker" stances. The speakeasies are extravagant with their gestures, throwing their heads back, bouncing around and so forth. The spacemakers are more introverted and make cocooning gestures in public when on the mobile. And, there are different styles of grip and touch.

As Plant (2002) notes, the advent of the mobile was bad news for philanderers, dropping clues of illicit behavior, like the phone turned off unaccountably in the middle of the day and messages left carelessly on the phone for a suspicious partner to find. The mobile has all sorts of other emotional functions too. Texting may be used more readily than speech by the shy and reserved. Generally, the mobile helps to maintain established relationships. This is particularly noticeable in girls' friendship groups, whereas boys tend to use the mobile more as a toy.

Plant sees the mobile as a feature of fragmented identity, as a kind of prop for the self, and she gives animal and bird analogies to identify typical modes of use, such as "the hedgehog way" of managing privacy. Her bird analogies are the Swift Talker, the Solitary Owl, the Calm Dove, the Chattering Sparrow, the Noisy Starling and the Flashy Peacock.

As a less amusing but more sociologically grounded typology, Plant (2002) draws upon Riesman's (1961/1989) distinctions between "tradition-direction," "inner-direction," and "outer-direction." Tradition-directed people are still likely to be scandalized by the use of mobiles in public places in that they cross the boundaries between public and private. The inner-directed person may use the mobile but be concerned about not breaking the traditional conventions of appropriate conduct in public. The outer-directed person embraces the boundary breaking of mobile telephony as part of a looser and more flexible lifestyle. These three types are associated with specific fears: for the tradition-directed, fear of dependence; for inner-directed, fear of guilt; for outer-directed, fear of isolation.

Plant is obviously on the side of the mobile phone, viewing it as a tool of emancipation, not only for the relatively well off but for the poor of the world, a stimulus to growth and

modernization in developing countries. For her, the critics are just fuddy-duddy old traditionalists. That conclusion may have been consoling to Motorola, though I am not sure quite how useful it is for stimulating the sale of upgraded 3G devices.

CONCLUSION

You will look in vain to find genuinely critical research on the mobile phone that opens up debate on its cultural value and social purpose, especially any such research commissioned by the likes of Motorola. On the other hand, the mobile has been studied and extolled as a valuable tool for organizing public protest (Rheingold, 2002). There is, of course, a good deal of carping about the mobile in public life, usually by what a recent television series in Britain called "grumpy old men." I suppose these are Plant's tradition-directed types. This is unfortunate since there is a critical question to be asked of the mobile phone to which perhaps anyone might be interested in the answer. While the mobile phone extends and increases the sheer volume of communications, does it actually improve the quality of communication?

Some would say this is an illegitimate question for social science, not least because it is methodologically impossible to answer. However, we can think and argue about it. In this respect, I would recommend a little book by the literary academic, George Myerson (2001), entitled *Heidegger, Habermas and the Mobile Phone*. Myerson compares the theorizing in social philosophy on the constitution of and blockages to satisfactory communication between people with the promotional discourse of the mobile phone industry that seems to promise imminent realization of the philosophers' dream. However, the industry's claims are shallow market speak, not serious grounds for a communicative utopia. To quote Myerson (2001, p. 27): "In the mobile version, we have millions of goal-seeking atoms, making basic contacts through the power of the network. In the philosopher's version, you have the slow, distinct 'conversation' through which parties seek a deeper contact…." In Myerson's estimation, the mobile functions to systematize the life world, "replacing meanings with messages, consensus with instructions and insight with information" (Myerson, 2001, p. 65).

Myerson's philosophical critique is challenging and should be taken seriously. The problem with such critique, however, is that it tends to be idealist rather than materialist. It may even inspire those who believe the clock should be turned back to some bygone age, as did Martin Heidegger but not Jürgen Habermas; that an Apparatgeist, in Katz and Aakhus's (2002) neologism for the mobile phone, could somehow be disinvented. This is hardly likely or desirable. It bespeaks a hopelessly romantic technophobia. The spirit of the machine in our mobile age of neo-liberal globalization is not a phantasm to be wished away but deeply embedded already in routine social practices and relationships, which is not to say it is beyond criticism. The mobile phone is most popular with youth and designed and marketed to be so, catching them young before maturity sets in. It is a "cool," miniature, and mystified gadget, no longer considered a luxury but felt to be a necessity by many. The mass-market potential of mobile telephony has been exploited to a remarkable degree in a very short period of time. Current and future developments in the industry are about further market expansion without limit, keeping the commodity process turning over relentlessly. The all-purpose mobile communication device linked to the Internet, providing a plethora of novel services such as film clips and the latest goals from the Premiership, video phoning and much else besides do not come cheap. The industry is desperate to persuade people to switch from 2G to 3G, throw

their old mobiles away and pay for new and much more expensive models and services. It is yet to be seen if that will happen to the extent sought by the telecom companies that are, in any case, not so sure about it as a few years ago when they shelled out huge sums for the franchises. Whether or not the latest thing is all that it is cracked up to be and catches on widely is always questionable and not only a matter of intellectual skepticism but also of popular judgment and consumer reluctance as well as enthusiasm. From a sociological point of view, actual and potential social uses across the generations and in different circumstances of life are more important topics for discussion than sheer technological capability and over-hyped marketing gimmicks.

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