

# **The Social Consequences of Mobile Telephony: Framing Questions**

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This paper focus on the voice mobile telephony that has become widespread since the 1990s, rather than on the new generation of mobile data services now appearing. Rather than explicitly considering social consequences in terms of policy implications (e.g. social exclusion) it deals with the minutiae of how everyday life is changing and how this relates to mobile telephony

Three challenges are considered in dealing with the question of ‘social consequences’:

1. The first is the common question faced by social analysts of what is of significance and why, what levels of analysis should we be dealing with, what types of phenomenon count as ‘consequences’?
2. Our living and working conditions, expectations and roles, experiences of time and space and the interrelationship of public and private are all changing, albeit over different time scales. So how important are the effects of a particular technology compared to those of other social forces and how, as well as how much, do we attempt to disentangle the consequences of a particular technology from all these other factors - or attempt to see them operating in conjunction?
3. New technologies like mobile telephony also arrive in a context where other information and communication technologies are entering into and changing our daily practices, and so to what extent should any account of the mobile be located amidst the influences of all these other ICTs?

In the discussion below three dimensions of mobile telephony are worked through to illustrate these how these challenges might be addressed and more generally to stimulate reflection for this workshop. These dimensions are:

- Parent-child relationships and mobile telephony, reflecting the interest in youth and children shown in some contemporary studies
- The changing experience of time and mobile telephony, drawing upon some recent discussions within the field of time studies
- The reaction to mobile telephony in public spaces, since this facet continues to figure highly in people’s evaluation of the mobile phone phenomenon

### **Parent-Child Relationships and Mobile Telephony**

In a historical perspective it must be remembered that both childhood and youth are social constructions. How they are experienced and lived out is not constant but changes over time, with changing expectations of these roles and of the options and constraints that accompany them. Sometimes change is gradual, over hundreds of years such as movement away from regarding children as simply small versions of adults (Ariès, 1973) or the emergence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of the concept of adolescence as a stage between childhood and adulthood (Gillis, 1981). Because such changes are relatively gradual it appears that successive generations have similar experiences. But there are also the more short to medium term changes. For example, there has been a lengthening of period of financial dependence on the family because of longer time spent in both education and training due to the pressures for certification and from youth unemployment. Arguably these have had far more impact on youth’s autonomy than any effects of mobile telephony.

One area of change which is relevant for understanding ICTs in general is children's mobility in everyday life, and more specifically, their presence in public spaces. There are claims that more generally social activities that in the past took place in public, are increasingly taking place in the home, which is itself becoming more public, more open to outsiders (Wellman, 1999). Children also experience this, having their friends around to interact with in their homes, in their own rooms. But the last decade or two has also seen the process, perhaps true more in some countries or areas more than others, whereby there has been a growing concern for children's safety in public spaces. A recent UK study of children and ICTs noted how parents felt under pressure to keep their children indoors (Livingstone, 1999). And there has been a shift to a situation where the vast majority of children in Britain are now driven to school because of safety concerns.

Such changes have evoked some ambiguity. In certain ways it is an infantilising experience for children and reflects some loss of independence. Parents also acknowledge that their children then miss out on the experience of playing out of doors (Livingstone, 1999). At the same time there is an added pressure on the parents to create a home environment which is stimulating and keeps the children occupied. Finally children's mobility is also more complex in that there are some studies suggesting how children's and youth's participation in organised activities away from home and visiting friends in their homes have increased, requiring them to be ferried around by their parents.

Apart from this changing experience of mobility, over many years children have increasingly gained access to various personalised ICTs. In the 1960s (to take the dates relating to Britain) children, especially teenagers, increasingly acquired their own record-players and radios, which in later years evolved into music systems. Since then many children have been provided with or acquired their own TVs, VCRs and PCs. Some had their own phone handsets and more recently we see more examples of children accessing the Internet from their own rooms. This multiplication of ICTs within their home and their individual possession is at one level a solution to issues around competition for communal resources - when different people, including children, want to watch different programmes, to access computers at the same time, or to use phone simultaneously. But in relation to the previous observations about mobility, in more recent years granting children access to a range of personal ICTs also reflects the need to provide alternatives if children are to be kept off the streets.

A third consideration is the history of discourses about what counts as 'good parenting' which involves parents monitoring what children do and what they have access to. The issue of the surveillance of children by parents is more clearly seen in the history of what type of and how much domestic television could be watched by children - but similar issues have re-occurred with the arrival of videos, video games, home computing and more recently the Internet. Specifically in relation to telecommunications we also see on the one hand surveillance in terms of parents showing an interest in who their children call and about what, and on the other hand children's interest in avoiding such surveillance and seeking privacy. The dilemma raised by the personalisation of ICTs described above is that it can make monitoring

of children by parents more difficult. Providing personalised ICTs is in some senses, then, a gesture offering children more independence.

The way in which children and youth have been allowed to have access to mobile telephony in recent years has to be seen in the light of these three processes. Through the mobile phone, telephony has at last joined the list of ICTs which many children no longer need to access as a communal resource - and that is almost as significant as the fact that the mobile is portable. Practically, and symbolically, it can give children and youth more independence in certain respects. It can give them an area of life over which they have control<sup>1</sup>. And at times mobiles provide more freedom from surveillance, more privacy in terms of making and receiving calls<sup>2</sup>. But mobile telephony also has a bearing upon children's changing mobility both in terms of facilitating the logistics of moving children around when they are outside the home and offering parents some peace of mind when children are out in unsupervised spaces (Klamer, et al, 2000).

In these small ways, mobile telephony has a bearing on children's lives, but this has to be understood in the context of complex patterns of children's mobility in everyday life, their increased access to personal resources and issues around and changes in parental surveillance.

### **The Changing Experience of Time and Mobile Telephony**

Researchers examining changing time patterns have noted the paradox that while time budgets show that on average the amount of leisure time has increased, many people perceive that their lives have become busier. They experience a faster pace of life mainly because they try to fit in more activities, which in turn reflects the greater options open to them (Garhammer, 1998). Obviously this is an uneven process across countries, areas (e.g. rural-urban) and social groups. Some people have time on their hands and make use of time-fillers. But at the other extreme research has shown just how busy households can be - for example, in dual career households, where the children are also following their own agendas (Frissen, 1997).

People's ability to manage this more intense living is aided by those options which provide flexibility in the management of time. In other words, the ability to time-shift activities can be as important as finding ways to save time. For example, the move to longer shop opening hours has allowed some households to change the time when shopping takes place, and for some a certain amount of flexibility in the timing of work has also facilitated the time shifting of activities. It has been argued that technologies such as the freezer are used for time-shifting labour in terms of buying food in advance of use (Shrove and Southerton, 2000). Indeed one modern meaning of the word 'convenience' (goods) is that they allow us to change the scheduling of activities (Warde et al 1998).

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<sup>1</sup> And in some cases autonomy and responsibility through allowing them to manage the financing of their own communications.

<sup>2</sup> Although in other senses being required by parents to carry mobile phones in order to be contactable when out of the home, introduces a different level of parental surveillance.

ICTs, too, offer further means of making our time flexible: from VCRs allowing us to watch programmes when we want, through answering machines and e-mail for receiving messages at the time of our choice to tele-everything enabling us to access facilities 24-hours a day. The mobile phone is another addition to this arsenal of tools. On the one hand, the mobile clearly enables additional communication that we might not have made before (as does e-mail) - for example, phatic calls where the point is not so much the message but the gesture of getting in touch. And those extra calls may help us be better able to be a good parent, thoughtful partner, or dutiful child to parents living elsewhere. But research shows how the mobile phone also enables us to shift calls themselves in both time and also space as we are no longer required to be in proximity to fixed lines. And through those calls we can re-schedule activities, changing plans when underway or at the last minute, more finely re-ordering the temporal structure of our lives to lead just-in-time lifestyles.

But once again, if mobiles have this 'impact' on our lives this has to be seen in the context of all other changes offering more temporal flexibility - which may be beneficial in some senses but can also have their downside. For example, there are the domestic co-ordination problems when individual household members are all flexibly following their own agendas, passing through the home at different times, eating at different times etc. What happens to time spent together? Then there are the problems of scheduling in times for face-to-face contact with members of wider social networks if many of them are also leading more flexible lifestyles. Some respondents in a recent study noted, regrettably, that they had increasingly to book appointments in advance because of this tendency (Klamer et al, 2000). Finally, if we become busier, what happens to personal time for such things as reflection?

Perhaps this all paints too gloomy a picture - people still make 'family time' happen, they make time for friends, they make time for themselves. But they sometimes observe that it is becoming more difficult to do so. The point is that while in specific ways the mobile phone may contribute to our temporal flexibility, when taking a wider view the mobile is only part and parcel of a whole range of technological and non-technological forces allowing us to alter our experiences of time.

### **Mobile Telephony in Public Spaces**

By now the 'friction between mobile users and co-present others' (Cooper, 2000) has been noted by a range of observers and is well documented in both qualitative research (Ling, 1998) and in quantitative surveys. For example, in a 1996, in Italy, the UK and Germany over half of those surveyed had some form of negative reaction to mobile phone use in public (Haddon, 1998).

Public use of the mobile phone has been the subject matter of debates on TV chat shows and mobile phone etiquette handbooks. There have been both formal attempts to regulate use creating mobile free zones in a variety of public spaces (on some parts of trains, in some restaurants, in theatres) and informal strategies of social control have been exercised against users (Ling, 1998). We have a range of technical features and options that offer to alleviate some of the problems (vibrator, voicemail, SMS) and there are examples of strategies used by mobile users to be more discrete. Yet still in European focus groups conducted last year (Klamer et al, 2000) this

experience of mobiles being used in public was the factor that continued to evoke strong negative emotional responses, especially by non-users, and active resistance to adoption.

Some recent writers have gone back to Simmel's account of the urban experience and the way in which we cope with the 'inflicted co-presence' of others by creating our own private spaces in public (Cooper, 2000) avoiding the gaze of others and avoiding interaction. Mobile ICTs have played a role in this respect, where the Walkman (Bull, forthcoming), the laptop or palmtop, handheld games and now SMS can all serve to cut us off from those immediately around us - and indeed using a mobile telephony can also be used to give a message to others concerning the user's non-availability to those physically present (Cooper, 2000).

However, it is way that mobile telephony disrupts the constructed spheres of privacy of others in those public spaces which is the issue. The two dimensions most usually picked out by various observers are the disruptiveness of the attendant noise in general (the ringing, the loud talk - Ling, 1998) and the content - the inappropriateness of discussing some private issues in public. But if look at some of actual comments of interviewees airing critical views on mobile use in public (Klamer et al, 2000) as well as at comments of various social observers, part of the 'impact' of the mobile may also be that it leads to people reflecting on wider issues.

The first issue is the question of appropriate communication - 'Is that particular call really necessary'. 'Couldn't it wait', 'Isn't it trivial', 'Could not things have been organised differently so that he or she didn't have to make the call?' To put such critical comments into context, there has been an on-going, and historical, debate concerning especially social calling, and different perceptions of what counts as unnecessary calls. This has been a gender issue but also an age one, as the worthwhilness of calls made by youth have been called into question. Mobiles, in part through the extra calls which they can engender and in part through making calls in new public settings, raise such questions yet again.

The second issue is the extent of contactability on the phone by others. This is a question raised by mobile users themselves, as they have to decided and negotiate with others about when and when they are not available (Ling et al, 1998). But some comments suggest that this issue may also be an issue for those co-present - what price is the greater reachability of people in general if the cost is the discontent of other members of the public?

Thirdly, and despite Simmel's discussion of strategies for maintaining urban anonymity, some people express a concern for the potential loss of any remaining sociability through this process of mobile users cutting themselves off from those co-present. In another guise we see something related in concerns that Internet users being on-line and interacting with distant others may reduce interaction with those immediately around them, such as the family.

The general lesson is that while we can attempt to understand the reactions to mobile telephony in public spaces, one 'consequence' is that the experience touches upon or raises broader, sometimes existing, reservations about how social life is developing.

## End note

The aim of this paper has been to look beyond question of 'social consequences' in term of what we do differently because of mobile telephony by supplying a discussion of the wider social contexts and issues in which mobile telephony intervenes.

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