

# **Cultural Differences in Communication: Examining Patterns of Daily Life**

By

**Dr Leslie Haddon**

Email: [LesHaddon@aol.com](mailto:LesHaddon@aol.com)

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Although the number of cross-cultural studies of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in general and of the mobile in particular is limited, in recent years we have seen a sufficient number of such studies that it might be timely to reflect upon the lessons to be learnt from these efforts. In addition to any methodological issues involved in actually making such cross-cultural comparisons, and specifically as regards evaluating what counts as ‘cultural’, it has sometimes proved difficult to move beyond descriptive observations. For example, different patterns sometimes emerged between countries, but it is either difficult to know why this happened, or else difficult to know what, theoretically, to make of these. At the same time, some researchers producing single-nation studies have at least tried to contextualise their results by saying what they feel is specific about their country<sup>1</sup>, or at least different from some other parts of the world. While welcome, it would also be useful to build on this in a more systematic way.

The aim of this article is to reflect upon some of the principles behind choosing what type of issue it might be worthwhile to look at cross-culturally as well as what types of cultural factors we might consider. Three worked examples relating to the mobile phone are then discussed, some more and some less familiar in the literature.

The article builds both upon a number of my own experiences and as well as other reports. First, it is based in my own general experiences and reflections on participating in international studies and my on-going interest in how to make sense of cultural differences in the adoption and use of ICTs. That experience involved taking part in a five-country<sup>2</sup> European survey of ICT adoption and use sponsored by Telecom Italia (Haddon, 1998), managing a five-country<sup>3</sup> European qualitative study of Internet use for NCR (Haddon, 1999), and being part of a EURESCOM pan-European study<sup>4</sup> of mainly the mobile phone and Internet, involving qualitative and quantitative components (Klamer, Haddon and Ling, 2000; Mante-Meijer et al, 2001).

Second, the article draws upon Sonia Livingstone’s article ‘*The Challenges of Cross-Cultural Research*’ (Livingstone, 2003). This reviews the limited literature in this field, examining both theoretical and methodological issues. She also draws examples from, amongst other things, her own pan-European study looking at how children experience screen media in various European countries (Livingstone, 1997; Livingstone and Bovill, 2001) as well as lessons to be learnt from other international projects.

Finally, this article uses material from a recent review of research on cultural factors influencing ICT adoption that was conducted for the European Action COST269 (Thomas et al, 2004). This review systematically constructed a typology of the different types of cultural factors that have been considered in previous studies of ICTs. The aim of that work was to provide a checklist of aspects to consider when

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<sup>1</sup> A good example of this can be found in the chapters of Katz and Arkhus, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK.

<sup>3</sup> Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, UK.

<sup>4</sup> Six countries (the Czech Republic, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain) took part in the qualitative study using focus groups. Nine (the previous 6 plus Germany, Norway, the UK) were involved in the survey.

trying to make sense of cultural and, especially but not only, national differences in the take-up of ICTs.

### Why conduct cross-cultural research?

*‘Cross-national comparisons are exciting, and yet they are difficult...In the field of media and communications, comparative research is often conducted and yet it is little discussed. In the social sciences more generally, cross-national comparative research has been attacked as impossible, yet defended as necessary’.* (Livingstone, 2003).

Livingstone explains some of the widespread interest in doing cross-cultural research. Apart from individual initiatives or collaborations between academic communities<sup>5</sup>, this interest comes from those companies increasingly operating in global markets as well as supra-Governmental bodies such as the EC. My own experience as outlined above exemplifies this, including participation on the steering committees of such bodies<sup>6</sup>. But Livingstone also points out *‘the growing sense of limitations of single-nation studies’* to the extent that they imply that what is found in one country applies elsewhere, without specifying the cultural context of those national studies. That said, there have been studies that have attempted to provide those very details. Indeed, perhaps this trend is increasing in recent years and at the type of international conferences such as the one at which an earlier version of this article was first presented<sup>7</sup>. This also means that we are gradually building up more examples of claims about and evidence concerning cultural influences, or at least the influences of different national contexts, upon which we can reflect in a little more detail.

Although the main emphasis of this article is on differences in experience, it is worth adding, as Livingstone also does, that it is important to appreciate cross-cultural similarities. But we need to ask at what level. In some senses the case of the mobile phone is interesting because similar general principles and processes are reported in various national studies. For example mobile phones are used for organising the logistics of everyday life, mobiles can change the way we arrange meetings, some calls and texting amongst youth often involves a gift relationship, there is an element of fashion to acquiring and using mobiles, etc. (as brought together in Ling, 2004). In addition, despite differences in the details of statistics, the EURESCOM study cited above noted the similarities in structure of different European markets, in terms of general patterns of growth and the importance of socio-demographics such as gender and age (Mante-Meijer et al, 2001). Finally, we will ask later how certain types of factors influencing adoption and usage are similar across countries – one key example being what the suppliers of telecoms offer in the first place.

As Livingstone argues, referring to Sarana, similarities also need to be explained (2003). Moreover, both policy-makers and companies are interested in similarities to the extent that policies or standardised marketing tactics can be applied across

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the World Internet Project, instigated by UCLA, is standardising some questions on national surveys about Internet use.

<sup>6</sup> The ‘e-Living’ EC fifth framework project ([www.living-digital.com](http://www.living-digital.com))

<sup>7</sup> ‘Mobile Communication and Social Change’, Seoul, October 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

countries and lessons learnt in one national study can be applied in another. But the main topic of interest to this article is if we do find variation in national statistics or practices based in cultural or other differences, how important are they within the overall picture? How important are differences relative to the similarities across cultures? And to what extent are globalising processes more important than local appropriations of technology<sup>8</sup>?

### **Choosing what national differences to explore**

If we start with the justification for particular cross-cultural comparisons, one first stage involves choosing what it might be worthwhile to investigate. Here, as a form of pre-research investigation, we might examine whether there is existing evidence or arguments suggesting that certain experiences or patterns of use are common internationally while in other cases we might anticipate national variation.

A related question that arises immediately is one of which countries we should compare<sup>9</sup>. For example, in certain respects the experiences of European countries (or particular groupings of them) might be more similar than if the comparison is made to North American, South American, Asian or African countries. And a further question is whether in some cases a country is the appropriate unit of analysis, especially if the variation within the country might be greater than differences with other countries. For example, work in COST269 looking at Swiss data noted that not only were there differences between the French, German and Italian speakers in that country as regards TV viewing and radio listening, but these patterns were similar to those in France, Germany and Italy respectively (Gilligan and Heinzmann, 2004). And in the screen media international study organised by Livingstone it was decided to focus on Flanders, not Belgium as a whole, because of the differences between the French and Flemish speaking communities.

One next consideration is that in both quantitative and qualitative studies there are often certain national differences, but they may not be theoretically interesting. For example, in the Telecom Italia's European survey there were often statistically significant differences but sometimes it was not clear why they existed, or what to say about them. Or, to take a qualitative example, children use the mobile at different times in different countries partly because of the timing of when the school day starts and ends. While one can understand this, it is not clear whether it can lead us on to more substantial reflections

In which case, there has to be some rationale saying why some differences in experience are strategically interesting, which can perhaps be justified in relation to some body of theory or academic debate or some policy issue. Differences relating to 'digital divides' might be a prime example here. But we might also consider some differences in experience to be important for company innovation policy or because of

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<sup>8</sup> Here it might be useful to appreciate parallels with media studies debates. On the one hand we have debates about the globalisation of media and cultural industries, making the experience of media increasing the same across countries. On the other hand, other writers emphasise the importance of local tastes, local product and local meanings, such that people in different countries can even interpret the same TV programmes differently

<sup>9</sup> Livingstone, 2003, has a more detailed discussion of the various rationales and research strategies than will be considered here.

some popular conceptions that need to be challenged<sup>10</sup>. Obviously different justifications imply addressing different audience in appropriate ways.

Lastly, it is worth anticipating how transitory any differences in experience may be. For example, if there are processes of convergence or globalisation at work, will some of the national variation that exists now soon decline or even disappear as a variety of countries are moving along the same trajectory (e.g. in terms of socio-demographic patterns of ICT use, such as those relating to gender and age). These current differences between countries may still be interesting. They still need to be explained, and the factors that cause them may be addressed in Government policy or company market innovation and development plans. But at some stage, it is clear that as a subject of cross-cultural research their relevance, and hence the shelf-life of the research, may eventually decline. In which case, when choosing an object of study, are there areas of life where we suspect that differences in ICT use are more likely to continue?

### **The role of cultural factors in shaping national differences**

‘Culture’ is probably one of the most contested words within the social sciences. There are different definitions in sociology, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, media studies and social psychology. Hence, our different backgrounds will make us sensitive to various claims about what counts as ‘cultural’ or not. And there will always be grey areas: i.e. if you look at something in one respect it could be argued we are talking about culture, whereas if you look at it in another we might have our doubts.

An example of relevance for mobile phones is the history of how national markets developed, how they are structured and how they are formally regulated. For example, within Europe, the early launch of a common mobile phone standard in the Nordic countries in part explains why the pattern of take-up over time is different from some other European countries. This standardisation process involved decisions by the state-run PTTs as well as by regulators. So would this count as an example of an influence that was not in some sense cultural? It was, in part, an administrative decision. At one level this is true, but those involved in those early negotiations would point to a tradition, at least in more recent times, of Nordic collaboration (COST248 Mobile Group, 1997). Would that then count as being cultural? And of course, while this marketing history accounts for what was on offer in these Nordic countries, early demand for mobile still had to be there – and what shaped that?

Another example might be the area of education. To what extent do the particular education system and particular educational arrangements (like the timing of the school day) in different countries reflect cultural values versus to what extent do they reflect historical, political and administrative decisions which could (easily?) have been otherwise? Or when the state, or any other body, intervenes to ban or regulate the use of mobile phones in certain public spaces, how much does that reflect local cultural values and how much is it just a decision of the body concerned, perhaps

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<sup>10</sup> If we taken an example of a national study that did this, Shotton’s 1989 book on ‘computer addiction’ was largely in response to media moral panics about the effects of people, mainly males, spending too much time on early home computers. This theme was also expressed in some academic work at the time (e.g. Turkle, 1984).

reacting to media concerns or to particular lobbying interests at the time. Again, could that policy have been otherwise? To what extent was it contingent?

It is with these considerations in mind that while the COST269 review of cultural factors offered a working definition of culture, it was in reality relatively open-minded about what counted as cultural factors, systematically charting what different claims had been made about cultural influences on, especially, the adoption of ICTs. The main examples are provided below.

There are variety of what might be called social structural factors, such as the degree of homogeneity versus heterogeneity in a nation and the extent to which countries were egalitarian or hierarchical<sup>11</sup>. For example, we could find claims that these had a bearing upon ICT diffusion for each of these dimensions. Social structural factors also covered communication patterns with the outside world, in part reflecting the histories of migration, which is relevant for the communications of diaspora in different countries.

There were various elements from what might be called the ‘social constructionist’ tradition of writing<sup>12</sup>. For example, in what ways are gender roles experienced differently in different cultures? This will, in part, have a bearing on women’s degree of participation in the labour force, for instance. Although we did not consider it in the review, how children’s roles (and parents’ roles) are socially constructed and are experienced differently in different countries could in principle be examined (with implications for different parent-children relationships<sup>13</sup>) (Haddon, 2004a).

The next area we charted pertained to the temporal structures of daily life. This included the time structures within which people in various countries operate, covering such aspects as how fragmented these are and the time allocated to different activities as well as their timing (e.g. when work time and non-work times occur). The temporal dimension also dealt with the subjective experience of time, such as differences in the degree to which people in different countries felt time stress (Klamer et al, 2000). For example, this might have a bearing on decisions to adopt technologies that offer solutions that save time or, more commonly, that allow more flexible use of time. Finally, the temporal dimension included cultural expectations about time, as exemplified by norms of communication and the rigidity of the boundaries between work and leisure times<sup>14</sup>.

Various cultural values that people had identified in the ICT literature (e.g. Hofstede (1980) and Trompenaars (1993) both looking at international managerial cultures).

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<sup>11</sup> Other dimensions considered included the role of religion, education, ethnicity, language and literacy, but these will not be elaborated here because they maybe less relevant for the particular worked examples from daily life that follow.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the social construction of childhood, James and Prout, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> For example, the screen media study revealed different parenting styles in different European countries, as illustrated by the ways in which parents regulated their children’s TV viewing (Pasquier, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> For example, when comparing the responses of US and Dutch focus groups, this willingness to blur home and work times was one of the differences between the two national groups (Mante, 2002). One Singapore study develops this idea with reference to monochronic and polychronic time cultures (Chung and Lim, 2004).

Other example of values included openness to innovation and the degree to which societies are individualistic or group-orientated, including family-oriented (Yoon, 2002).

Communication forms, patterns and expectations had been identified as potential influences in various writings on ICTs. This included the wider role in society of oral versus written communication, as well as the role of music and images in different cultures. It covered whether one can talk about a ‘communications culture’ consisting of expectations of appropriate speech behaviour (e.g. Puro, 2002 on Finland) or whether communication cultures are ‘high context’ or ‘low context’<sup>15</sup> (Hall, 1997).

Finally we have material culture, where different cultural values have shaped and become embedded in the physical world, as reflected in spatial considerations (especially the rural-urban division), national differences in housing characteristics and everyday artefacts themselves.

### **Worked examples: some areas of mobile phone research for cross-national study**

#### *Constraints on mobile use: on choosing to use the mobile as opposed to other channels of communication*

If we regard the totality of our communications options as a repertoire from which we are regularly choosing, then previous research has charted the list of possible considerations that could influence those choices (Haddon, 2003). Subsequent UK research involving day-in-the-life-of diaries and interviews suggested that although it was by no means the only factor, the costs involved in using different channels of communication were a major consideration shaping British people’s choices between channels<sup>16</sup> (Haddon and Vincent, 2004). In other words, at some moments, for some calls, people might use the mobile rather than the fixed line because it was cheaper - and vice versa if the fixed line was cheaper. Or that might delay calls until a time when cheaper tariffs applied. Children, especially, were under pressure from parents to consider costs when making calls or choosing channels. But the parents were also cost conscious in this respect. In fact, this very small-scale study was backed up by the older Telecom Italia survey data relating to Britain that suggested there was a widespread sensitivity to the price of telecoms costs in general and that this was a constraint influencing calling decisions.

We do not have comparative statistical data concerning these decisions to use mobiles in different countries. But we can turn again to the older data from the 1996 Telecom Italia study relating to the fixed line to give us at least a general indication of how

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<sup>15</sup> When people communicate in ‘low context’ cultures they take for granted implicit understandings that do not have to be articulated. When such patterns of communication operate, participants agree on the structure of decisions quickly, they do not have to spend time negotiating each set of understandings from basic principles. Abbreviations, emoticons such as the ‘smilies’ used in e-mail and the development of other such codes that are understood by the communicators would be examples of low context communication.

<sup>16</sup> This was a qualitative studies where 3 families kept dairies for a day and then in a subsequent interview explained their particular choices of communications channel on that day as well as their patterns of using different channels more generally.

much national, or at least European, variation we might expect as regards people's sensitivity to telecoms costs.

**Sensitivity to phone costs and strategies for controlling these on the fixed line (%)**

	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Spain</b>	<b>UK</b>
Say that they are cost sensitive	65	63	70	78	57
Phone when cheap rates apply	65	62	63	57	72
Limit their own phone calls	62	61	70	69	55
Limit others household members' phone calls	41	37	51	48	35

In one sense, this survey established that the cost of telephony in general was a consideration and that it influenced people's strategies across countries. But we can also see a certain amount of variation. In the original, fuller, tables this was statistically significant.

As a kind of pre-research research investigation for this article, informants in various other countries (Italy, Slovenia, Russia, Hong Kong) were asked to comment on some of the day-in-the-life diaries filled in by the UK respondents. They were requested to reflect on the extent to which the British families' decisions would apply in their own countries. And what surprised them about the day-in-the life descriptions of British life. Of course, such methodologies have potential pitfalls, but as informants about their countries, some of the points they raised were interesting. One key observation was that the tariff arrangements on offer in the various countries were different. In the UK there are deals where some mobile calls are free at certain times, deals where mobile calls to people on the same network were sometimes free, deals where users have a number of 'free' minutes of calls, a certain number of 'free' text messages, etc. These mean that if British users really do want to keep down costs, they can do so by making various calculations about which channel of communication to use under varying circumstances. Many of these were deals not on offer in the other countries, and so there was not the tariff system that can invite the type of complex calculations that the British respondents were making. Sometimes other deals were on offer instead in the other countries.

Still thinking about the nature of the telecoms markets, these informants pointed out how the costs of fixed telephony and of mobiles, and of phoning between the two, varied by country (and we can also anticipate that this varied in relation to average national incomes). This too had a bearing upon the daily choices people made in the different countries. In fact, in general the history of telecoms development in different nations is such that in some countries it has been more difficult to get a fixed line for the home at all, as in much of the third world and Eastern European at one stage. Sometimes there has been a shortage of public telephone booths relative to demand (Kim, 2002, on South Korea). Therefore the very telecoms infrastructure available also makes the 'choice' of using a mobile or not different across countries.



In which case, are apparent national differences in reality explained away mainly by these various aspects of the telecoms market structure? If this was the cause of people's everyday communication choices then one implication is that the main concern for international telecoms companies should lie more in the realm of economics than other social sciences. This may be in terms of charging what the companies can get away with when there is high demand and few alternatives or else in terms of the particular packages of tariff elements that they offer.

But given the point of this article is to explore cultural influences, we should ask what other things might a cross-cultural study consider when looking at the choice of mobile from among other options and when reflecting upon the constraints on mobile phone usage. One consideration would be the value that different cultures might put on mediated (non-face-to-face) communication in general. Another may be more specifically the ability to make spontaneous contact. That may partly reflect the communication norms and expectations that have emerged in different cultures, including the extent to which people have become 'locked into' certain patterns of mobile use. Moreover, those patterns may themselves reflect such dimensions as the time structures of different societies, including how 'busy' people are, and maybe even the degrees of mobility (i.e. travel) in everyday life.

In other words, if the cost structures of telecoms channels (and the existence of viable alternatives to mobiles) provides the 'supply' part of the equation, the willingness of people to pay different costs, in the language of economics their 'marginal utilities', may nonetheless be influenced by a range of cultural factors, by the circumstances of people's daily lives and by the values related to them.

In the light of the hype stressing that various communications channels such as the mobiles allow us to communicate 'anytime, anywhere', promising a certain freedom, this discussion reminds us that this freedom is exercised under, in this case, economic constraints. But there are additional issues. How important these constraints are, how they are experienced, what they mean to people and how much do they affect choices may all vary across cultures.

#### *Constraints on mobile use: Use of the mobile phone in public spaces*

Issues around the use of mobiles in public spaces are very well documented in various national studies. In fact, they appeared as a theme when a mobile literature was first emerging (Ling 1997; more recently Rice and Katz, 2003 and Ling 2004). One particular aspect that we consider here is phone use or related behaviour in the presence of unknown others, including latter's reactions to that use. This has been characterised in various ways, for example, as the 'colonization', or 'invasion' of public space by private communications (Geser, 2004). Various researchers have then outlined the responses of those who are co-present when people use the mobile, such as exhibiting 'civil inattention'. They have also noted the strategies of mobile users to minimise any disruption. Moreover, when we move beyond considering public spaces in general, the picture is more complex if we examine the specificities of, and thus expectations about, behaviour in different types of public space. In this respect, restaurants have, for example, have received some attention: behaviour and

expectations vary depending upon the nature, or sophistication, of the restaurant that we are considering<sup>17</sup> (Ling, 2004; Ito and Daisuke, 2003, Plant in Geser, 2004).

However, while this interaction has been discussed in a number of national studies, there are some clues that there is actually cross-cultural variation in the extent to which calling in public is an issue for those co-present and the extent to which callers feel constrained in their calling behaviour. If we review survey data, the Telecom Italia study found some national variation in people's reaction to the mobile phone in public spaces. Or if we look at the particular claims made about national cultures, one early Italian study noted how in Italy the mobile phone had become a particularly 'antisocial' instrument (Fortunati, 1997). This is because '*wherever the emphasis is placed on the individual, as in the Italian case, the public sphere goes neglected and unheeded*'. To support this argument, the research then cites other studies of the Italian's reluctant inclination to respect the 'res publica' (compared, implicitly, to some other European countries). In fact, the five-country Telecom Italy survey showed that Italians were distinctly more willing to switch their phones on in a range of public spaces compared to some other Europeans (Haddon, 1998c). A similar point was later made about Israelis' willingness to use the mobile in most public spaces, complete with anecdotal examples that received widespread media coverage (Schejter and Cohen, 2002).

At the other extreme, Japan has been picked out as a country where norms of non-intrusion demand that a rather 'low level of noise is maintained' in public spaces (Geser, 2004). Japanese research has itself drawn attention to the way this translates into attempts to regulate the use of the mobile phone, favouring the use of non-voice communications (Ito and Daisuke, 2003). Between these two extremes, other comparative work, such as a set of ethnographies carried in different European capital cities, argues that there are variations in national behaviour: for example, the French are more reluctant to make public calls than the English or Spanish (Lasen, in Geser, 2004).

In other words, there is evidence of cultural differences. But why would this be interesting? First, in discussions of the social consequences of mobile telephony a number of writers have observed that this use of the mobile in public spaces is threatening existing norms of communication, '*shattering old rules*' (e.g. de Gourney, 2002). The point is that if there is cultural variation as outlined above, this argument may simply be more true of some cultures than of others. Second, if we want to understand differences in the use of the mobile in daily life, the strength of public norms can have a bearing upon the medium of communication used. This was clear from the Japanese studies of the regulation speaking on the mobile in Japan, which favours the use of textual messaging. By implication, societal norms it may also have a bearing upon peoples' use of strategies to minimise disruption to public spaces (e.g. in terms of their willingness to go off and seek quiet places to call). And variation in these communications norms may help us to understand the degree to which various bodies (from restaurant owners to railway operators) develop policies to regulate

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<sup>17</sup> Fortunati describes equivalent variations even with different types of train in Italy, and lists a range of factors that can affect how we behave in public spaces, Fortunati, 2003.

mobile phone use, or else make allowances for it, in the various public spaces over which they have authority<sup>18</sup> (Geser, 2004).

In this second worked example, what possible cultural factors may have a bearing upon this behaviour? One first caveat here is that many of these discussions talk about the reactions of unknown co-present others, assuming the kind of experience of anonymity captured in Simmel's description of people coping with urban life at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Simmel, 1997). While there may be similar experiences in many towns and cities around of the world, if we are really being cross-cultural it is important to remember that not all countries have the same proportion of urban populations. Furthermore, in some urban settings, people do not always lead such anonymous lives as depicted by Simmel, but instead interact with many of the people they happen to meet on a daily basis. What happens to this whole area of communication in public space when those co-present are not so totally 'unknown' as suggested in some of the mobile phone scenarios?

Turning to cultural influences on the behaviour described above, at the heart of some of these discussions is the notion of culturally different communication norms, as well as different codes of '*courtesy, etiquette and manners*' (Ling, 2002). This applies especially to our willingness to allow other people some privacy in public spaces. Research on this issue would have to be able to specify what these norms were and derive evidence of their existence. But we might also want to ask why these particular norms exist. For example, in commenting on the Philippines experience, one researcher noted that in some densely populated settings people became more tolerant as regards allowing other people to have private communication spaces to make calls. In response, the callers are also more considerate of those around them<sup>19</sup>. In which case, should we consider aspects such as population density, the 'crowdedness' of some urban settings, and even the options for mobile users to find more isolated and quieter spaces to make calls (such as private cars as opposed to only having the option to use public transport occupied by others).

Beyond communication norms, maybe we ought also to consider values related to how orderly public spaces should be and expectations of more general behaviour in these such settings. For example, what is tolerated and what is not (e.g. in terms of what counts as disturbing behaviour and how this is policed)? Although the discussions of private calls in public spaces often dwell on the question of the private content of calls as being one of the key disruptive elements, we might also want to consider norms about general noise levels: for example, ones that were breached when the Walkman first appeared in the 70s (Du Guy et al, 1997). As we saw, this was also touched upon in discussions of why the mobile is sometimes not tolerated (Geser, 2004, writing about Japan).

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<sup>18</sup> In principle, the mobile picture phone may well be another technology where we might expect national variation in reaction to use in public space – certainly there is some variations in their regulation, with some countries banning their use outright.

<sup>19</sup> This was from a paper that was originally going to be presented at the Grimstad conference in 2003, by Fernando Paragas.

### *Controlling reachability*

Even some of the earliest literature on the mobile noted that while people may appreciate the greater ability to contact others because they have mobile phones, at the same time they do not also welcome being so available to others (Ling et al, 1998). In other words, there is an issue of ‘reachability’. In fact, some of this sentiment predates the mobile phone, as shown in earlier research on the fixed line. In the Telecom Italia European survey cited early, a substantial minority, 37%, found fixed-line calls to be disruptive to greater or lesser extent, and many people had developed strategies for managing incoming communication<sup>20</sup>. Technological innovations such as the answering machines<sup>21</sup> and caller line identification have added to their resources for achieving this degree of control.

The literature has identified various reasons why instant communication (i.e. synchronous communication) can be disruptive, whether on the fixed line or the mobile. An example might be if mobile calls arrive in settings where it is inappropriate to take them, if they arrive when people are doing something else (e.g. preparing the children for school, having dinner), or if the timing of incoming calls is for some other reason socially awkward (e.g. teenagers receiving calls from parents when their peers are present). Hence, in the case of the mobile phone, people have added to the strategies for controlling incoming communications, such as limiting who has their mobile number, switching the mobile off, negotiating the importance of the call with the caller when the mobile rings, sending calls to voice mail, etc. However, we should add that it is not just instant calls that can be a problem. Other research has underlined the ways in which even asynchronous email can be perceived as being time consuming (Haddon, 2004b), especially, but not only, spam. Moreover, they can create further demands on people, including pressures to reply to communications.

At the micro level of individual experiences and interactions the issue of reachability is interesting because the new channels that have been added to our communications repertoire. This means that managing communications has become more complex. There are new demands on us, new things to take into account. Indeed, some people have a sense of being overloaded with communication

*“Sometimes it infringes on your privacy. I mean you want to be left alone and unless you switch the thing off...For example, my husband (calls and asks) “Where are you, what are you doing’. (And I think) ‘Oh, leave me alone, don’t drive me mad’.” (Haddon and Vincent, 2004).*

But at the same time, the very management of reachability can create tensions if other people feel they have a right to contact you. Meanwhile, the demands of reciprocity

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<sup>20</sup> These were (a) blocking incoming communication in some way (e.g. by leaving the phone off its resting place (‘off the hook’) so that the call could not arrive, turning the ringer off etc.), (b) not answering calls, (c) getting someone else to answer calls and (d) asking people who phoned into the home to avoid calling at certain times.

<sup>21</sup> In the Telecom Italia survey, 18% used the answering machine to filter calls often, and 32% did so occasionally

create tensions if people do not ring back, text back or email back. As one interviewee commented in the recent UK study of email:

*“People are getting so difficult to reach on the phone. They hide behind their answering machines, they hide behind their messaging services. They don’t bloody return your calls! (...). For all the accessibility of modern technologies, people are becoming less accessible. And I think they’re doing it in part to survive.”* (Haddon, 2004).

At the macro level, we know that these issues vary within the population. For example, in the early Telecom Italia study of the phone, some may have been disturbed by calls but for the majority of people incoming calls were on the whole not disruptive. Indeed, many people still receive very few phone calls and so they are not under a great pressure to manage them. But others are. The question of interest in this article is whether the reachability issue is fairly universal when we look across countries or whether there is any evidence that this too dimension of communication also varies. Is managing reachability actually more problematic in some places than others? This question has, perhaps, an added interest because we have seen how it relevant to other channels of communication beyond the mobile phone. Is it more acceptable to be reachable through some channels more than others in different cultures?

Once again, if we look at some older Telecom Italia data from 1996, there were small but statistically significant differences between the five European countries as regards whether the fixed line was disruptive, and in the degree to which they made an effort to control incoming calls. If we turn specifically to the mobile, we see some differences in people’s willingness to give out mobile numbers.

#### **Giving out car and mobile phone numbers to family and friends**

(%)

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Spain</b>	<b>UK</b>
Always	77	52	61	49	64
Depends	11	26	28	28	21
Never	10	19	10	15	12

Moreover in the section above on public spaces, we saw that there were variations in terms of people’s willingness to switch phones off – with the Italians being far less willing to switch them off in a variety of spaces. This finding is also relevant for the discussions of reachability being considered in this section.

If there is, then, reason to suspect that the managing reachability is experienced a little differently cross-culturally, what types of factors might we need to take into account? If one consideration is your obligations to be accessible to others, or the rights of others to have access to you, we might ask what could cause this to vary. One possibility is the extent to which, in different cultures, one can be individualistic

compared to the importance of responding to the demands of one's social networks: be that family, friends or work colleagues. If we think specifically of parents-children relationships, we noted earlier how the roles, and rights, of children (of different ages) can be perceived differently in different cultures - for example, in terms of how much privacy children can have (Yoon, 2001, comparing Korea and some other Asian cultures to European ones). Does this have a bearing upon the degree to which, in different cultures, children can control how much their parents can contact them? More generally, we might want to consider how egalitarian or hierarchical different societies are, given that this can influence who has the right to contact whom. And looking to the temporal issues, are there more times (or maybe we should say 'situations') when reachability is an issue in some cultures more than others?

## Conclusions

There is a growing interest in cross-cultural studies, although, as Livingstone points out, a more limited discussion of the principles and practical considerations involved in conducting these. At the same time, we are seeing an increasing number of national studies that attempt to explain cultural specificities - which this article has tried to bring together more systematically.

The first step was to outline some of the factors influencing the choice of the object of study, including where there is pre-existing evidence of national similarities or differences. But beyond identifying these patterns, we need to ask about the wider relevance of the object of study, and the degree to which differences in national patterns may be temporary.

The next section summarised a recent review of existing claims work contained in national studies of ICTs about the cultural factors at work shaping the adoption and use of those technologies. These insights were then applied to the mobile phone, thinking specifically about factors shaping the use of the mobiles in daily life. Three worked examples were then considered: the economic considerations shaping the decision to make mobile calls, the experience of making calls public spaces and the management of our reachability by the mobile. In each case, we saw evidence leading us to anticipate some cultural variation and arguments why it would be relevant to explore these dimensions of everyday life. Lastly, some potential cultural, and other, influences were suggested as being factors that we would need to investigate.

What the three worked examples share in common is that they all challenge the promise that the mobile phone enables us to communicate 'anytime, anywhere'. They do this by illustrating the social (and economic) constraints at work, which have been found to apply equally well to other communications media<sup>22</sup>. Hence, it is important to appreciate these constraints in order to understand both patterns of usage and more generally the way we manage our communications. If these constraints are themselves open to cross-cultural variation, then that well to clarify some of the variation we see in how people in different cultures communicate in their everyday lives.

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<sup>22</sup> De Gournay and Smoreda, 2001, on the phone; Lelong, B and Beaudouin, V. (2001), on the Internet.

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