

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MOBILE PHONE

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The concept of 'domestication', with its connotations of 'taming the wild', has been used to analyse the complex process by which information and communication technologies (ICTs) enter and subsequently find a place within household routines and practices (Silverstone et al, 1992). This paper aims to extend that concept beyond the home to consider the implications for our understanding of the experience of mobile telephony in other social spaces. In so doing it draws upon empirical research recently made available through the efforts of the COST248 programme and is informed by a range of qualitative empirical studies conducted at Sussex University in the 1990s.

Domestication of the mobile phone

Inspired in part by the more general and growing literature on consumption (Miller, 1995), research first at Brunel and later Sussex University in the 1990s explored how people's experience of ICTs related to household and individual values, orientations and lifestyles (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995, 1996; Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). This framework has subsequently been used in a range of other European studies, mainly in the Low Countries and Scandinavia¹. On the one hand, ICTs come pre-formed with meanings through such processes as advertising, design and all the media discourses surrounding them. But afterwards households and individuals invest them with their own significance. This includes the effort involved before acquisition in imagining how they might find a place in the home and a role in people's lives, the household discussions about the decision to acquire them and the process afterwards of locating these ICTs in domestic time and space.

Clearly this framework implies that there is a good deal to the process of consuming these technologies - far more than just buying and using them. Technologies and the services they deliver are also symbolic. They are talked about and displayed. Their presence is the subject of negotiation amongst household members, while access to them is regulated and sometimes contested. The arrival of such ICTs can raise issues or create problems according to the domestic politics of the household. Hence the emergence of strategies to maintain or regain control over these technologies, while at the same time their presence can open up new possibilities, sometimes modifying the routines and practices of the home as well as the relationships between household members.

In principle we might apply this framework to the mobile phone. We can certainly ask about the process of acquisition, how buying a mobile phone is justified, and whether the technology is resisted by some household members for any reason. We might ask whether there is competition over who has access to the mobile phone and under what conditions. Is it sometimes compulsory (e.g. for teenagers) to take the phone and leave it switched on or else agree to call home at certain times? And one existing study already draws attention to the way in which the mobile can modify relations between household members, enabling 'remote mothering'. (Rakow and Navaro, 1993).

¹Sussex was until recently the centre of an EC sponsored European network of researchers: EMTEL.

However, it is already clear that even as we continue to focus in these examples on household relationships, the portable nature of the technology has moved the locus of attention beyond the home to the other sites of 'everyday life'. And while household members may still exert some influence on the use and meaning of mobile ICTs, we need also to consider the influence of others on the consumption of such technologies. What, then, are the processes by which the mobile phone is domesticated outside the home? What issues does the technology raise, what strategies are used to control it, what change in practices does it provoke or enable and in what ways is it implicated in social relationships. Specifically three themes are developed in the following discussion:

1. The role of the mobile phone in relation to work-related mobility
2. The display of and rules concerning the mobile phone in public spaces
3. The management of contactability through the mobile phone

Work-related mobility

It is first important to remember how significant work has been as a route to establishing what have become, or are potentially in the process of becoming, mass markets for a range of ICTs: the answerphone, the fax, the computer² and currently the Internet, especially for its e-mail facility³. A previous British study from the early 1990s showed the importance of work-related access to mobile phones for a range of social groups, not just the wealthy, which provided some early familiarity with the technology (Wood, 1993). And even after mobile telephony has become more commonplace, recent research at Sussex indicated how people continued to justify the acquisition or use of the mobile phone for work purposes, even when they acknowledged that they actually used it more for private calls (Sussex MTEL, 1998).

Work-related mobility comes in a number of guises. We might consider the travel involved in commuting to work or the mobile workforce who on a daily basis spend their time to a greater or lesser extent visiting the premises of clients or customers. But some general social processes concerning such mobility can be demonstrated by a French study from mid-1990s⁴ which focused on a certain type of mobile worker: the 'nomadic' worker who spends time away from the home base on a business trip either within his or her own country or abroad (de Gourney et al, 1998).

²Although their use for interactive games played a pivotal in the early years of home computers (Haddon, 1988), the author's research in the 1990s suggests that work is playing an increasingly important role - certainly in the UK context.

³This observation is based on a five-country current study of the Internet called 'Locating the Virtual Community in the Households of Europe' which the author is co-ordinating. This is sponsored by NCR.

⁴This 1995 study examined the work and social patterns of nine nomadic workers already known from earlier research conducted in 1990-2. Subsequently they had acquired mobile phones and other related technology so in this study the researchers accompanied them on trips and interviewed them to see how the technology had fitted into their lives.

The first observation concerns the maintenance of boundaries around mobile phone technology. These nomadic workers used the phone virtually entirely for work purposes, rather than for social contact with friends and family. If they did have contact with their family via the mobile phone it was to pass on a work-related message or announce that they were coming home. This pattern of use was not a company requirement, nor did it arise just because mobile calls were dearer. These particular mobile workers preferred to use the fixed phone in the hotel room at the end of the working day to speak to their families because it felt more relaxed. They were at ease with this technology, holding longer, more confidential and expressive conversations.

As regards the symbolism, the users preferred a fixed phone because they could define an intimate area within public zones which allowed them to talk in a more confidential, considerate and attentive mood away from worries of cost and from any interruptions or interference from the environment. The fixed phone provided a time and space that was favoured personal and emotional expression as well as long and intimate conversations. (de Gourney et al, 1998)

In contrast, the mobile was for the most part used for shorter, more functional calls.

...the mobile phone was convenient because it allowed them to do away with common courtesy rules, as well as allowing them to cut short a conversation that they did not want to continue. The mobile phone was not a colder or less friendly medium per se. Rather its use reflected a more general tendency for communications of an efficient, business nature. Similarly, the mobile phone provided an excuse for to remove those conventions and obligations symbolising reciprocity which still applied to the social interpersonal communication usually governed by common courtesy. Because of the technical constraints of the mobile phone (e.g. that it was uncomfortable, costly, it was dangerous to use when driving, etc.), they managed to avoid any aspect of conversation that was irrelevant. (de Gourney et al, 1998)

What this demonstrates is how some people, at least, compartmentalise their life and their ICTs, here restricting the mobile phone to specific purposes, for specific modes of communication. In fact, part of that imposition of boundaries involved controlling who had access to the mobile phone number. More contemporary research shows that nowadays people may exercise a similar control but in a different direction - only giving out the number to friends and to acquaintances and not to work colleagues, preferring to use the phone more for social contact than for work⁵.

Another practice that emerged amongst the nomadic workers in this study involved leaving the mobile on to remain contactable by work colleagues while finding a few hours to sightsee before and after formal work meetings. For example, one mobile user in this study remained theoretically at work in the sense of receiving information and making decisions. But he used that time between meetings for social purposes,

⁵This is based on a recent five country quantitative study for Telecom Italia in which the author was involved, 'Verso uno scenario Europeo delle telecomunicazioni'

whereas he had previously been tied down to fixed locations in order to be near a telephone. In effect this meant that he was using the mobile phone to transform the 'on-call' component of work, freeing some fragments of time for personal use while away from the home and office. Of course, the opposite also occurs - but still altering the boundaries of work and personal time - when people now use time spent commuting or travelling to make their work-related calls. Like other portable ICTs such as the laptop PC, such ICTs have facilitated the expansion of work into previously personal time periods.

Early we noted the maintenance of boundaries between work and social life, and the way the use of the mobile phone was contained within the field of work. This same study shows the processes of seepage between the different spheres of life. An early study of telework (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995) noted the processes by which ICTs initially dedicated for work started to find some personal or domestic applications. In this French study, an example of such a development was the practice of phoning the local tourist office on the mobile phone when arriving in a new area to discover what might be worth visiting or whether there were any events. So while the mobile was not used in this particular group for sociable calling, it was used for the more goal-oriented, rational organisation of personal time, the type of call first promoted with early domestic telephony (Fischer, 1992).

The aim in this section is not to claim that the particular examples examined here are widespread. Rather, it is show how the processes of containment and seepage between different aspects of life and managing the, sometimes shifting, boundaries between work and non-work take place outside of the home as well as within it. But previous studies of domestication which had focused on the home had also indicated how such on-going processes were dynamic. Hence, we could equally well ask how the experience of mobile ICTs can change. The use of such technologies need not simply 'settle down' after the early period of acquisition. Instead, these ICTs can have careers, their role in our lives developing over time (Haddon, 1997). This can be due to changes not only in the circumstances of individuals and households, but also through wider social changes as well as changes in the very nature of the technology.

For example, this particular French study took place at a relatively early stage in the mobile phone market and while some people may still use mobile phones in this way, there is far more use of the technology for social purposes by the end of the 1990s. Hence in the discussion above it was noted that containment might now appear in a different guise, restricting the mobile phone to social communications. The mobile phone is also part of an ensemble of portable technologies - indeed, it has been technically merged with some other portable ICTs, more recently⁶. Even within the period covered by the original French study it was possible to observe some dynamic in this respect as a number of the participants changed their working practices to link the phone with the computer in order to transfer data as part of a mobile office. A final

⁶The Nokia 'Communicator' being an early example of a device combining handheld PC plus mobile phone.

example of the potential for change in the use of the mobile phone arises from the blurring of the very boundary between home and work. He might consider 'flexibility' we are increasingly asked to have in relation to work. Certainly, in the author's British interviews over the last few years, participants often referred to work increasingly entering the home, or their being more available for work in what had previously been more clearly defined private times.

Mobile calls in public spaces

One of the processes described in the domestication framework is 'conversion' whereby households and individuals convert the private and personal meanings of their ICTs into public statements to the outside world, one principle means being through the display of technologies to others. The focus on this particular symbolic dimension of ICTs clearly draws upon the consumption literature ranging from the 'conspicuous consumption' of Veblen to the writings of Bourdieu on the role of taste in the on-going perpetuation of class differences.

The earlier study of telework illustrated well this side of domestication. Teleworkers often faced a problem that outsiders did not appreciate that they really worked precisely because they were based at home (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993). They commented that others thought they were really 'unemployed' or 'just a housewives'. Hence the conscious strategy of making sure that they showed their technologies and work spaces to visitors to underline the fact that they were seriously engaged in employment, indeed sometimes in high tech work.

What portable technologies such as the mobile phone allow is for display to take place outside the home. They become what advertisers have called 'technological jewellery', some of which can be worn on the body. To what degree such display is engaged in actively and to what extent any symbolic meaning relies more on the interpretation of onlookers is a moot point. For example, in a study by Sussex University researchers those interviewed denied that their mobile was being used to give messages about their own social image (Sussex MTEL 1998). Instead they talked about the utilitarian, functional role of the technology. Yet the researchers involved pointed out how display, sometimes more conspicuous than others, was giving messages about lifestyle and about the type of people using them: they were busy people who others wanted to contact⁷.

We found many of our male interviewees precisely because they wore their phones visibly - and not only when they were using them. They carried them either in their hands or on their belts, or left them lying on cafe tables; often prominently. These were all public announcements of ownership. This kind of visible display appears to be

⁷Here we might note some possible cultural differences - contemporary research has noted how much the French users concealed their mobile phones (de Gournay, 1994)

gendered; we had problems finding women phone owners, when they were not actually using their phones. (Sussex MTEL, 1998).

Apart from the display of the technology, there are issues concerning how we make and receive mobile phone calls in different types of public space. Within the home context, some household members often attempt, with greater and lesser degrees of success, to regulate the use of ICTs by others. Probably the most common example is of parents setting rules about children's consumption of TV, interactive games or their use of the telephone. However, in many public settings any such rules are usually less formalised, often more tacit, sometimes ambiguous and more in the form of expectations about appropriate behaviour held by those present.

The whole question of calls infringing the rules of a public space can be illustrated with some examples from a Norwegian study focusing in particular on mobile phones in restaurants (Ling, 1998)⁸. Ling argues that the key point is that those eating at in restaurants create private spaces within a public place. They purchase a certain amount of privacy for the duration of their stay, even if they are in full view, which they expect others to respect and the restaurant owners to maintain. There are variations between types of restaurant and a degree of flexibility in certain situations, but this expectation of privacy is the main theme. Drawing on the work of Goffman regarding how people present themselves in everyday life, Ling notes the rules and rituals of eating out - i.e. how visits to the restaurant involve a social performance, with correct behaviour but also the possibilities of making mistakes. Against this background Ling then turns to the issue of why mobile phone calls infringe those rules, disturbing expectations of privacy.

All participants know, with some clarity, the cost of eating out; it is listed for all to see on the menu. Implied in this is the assertion of status and the idea of gifting. Therefore, to eat out is to give evidence as to one's position in society. To invite one to a restaurant is to, in some respects, set a price on a social relationship. In a similar way, to accept such an invitation has the implication of indebting one to their host. Thus, untoward things that disturb the experience, such as the ringing of a mobile telephone, not only disrupts the work of maintaining facades, but also can depreciate the exchange between the dining partners. This sentiment was quite common among the informants who noted, for example "I have paid a lot of money for that meal." and "[Hearing a mobile phone in a restaurant] can make you feel like you've wasted money and made a bad choice about what you did that evening." (Ling, 1998)

Ling examines an aspect neglected in Goffman's own work - inappropriate sounds. In fact, there are many sounds in a restaurant which people have learnt to ignore, including the ringing of a fixed telephone. Hence it is not sound per se which is important but its qualities and whether it is seen as being symbolically intrusive. In particular Ling notes how the ringing of the phone fits into a family of inappropriate sounds and how others present react to the 'problem' that when making calls mobile

⁸This is based mainly on focus group discussions organised by the telecoms company Telenor.

phone users tend to talk more loudly on the phone partly to compensate for lack of non-verbal communication and partly to overcome any background noise.

Lastly, the study considers the repertoire of responses employed by others in the restaurant in response to the offending mobile user. These can start with efforts to ignore the event and focus on something else. There are then various degrees to which others present can challenge the mobile user, through non-verbal communication or through actual comments. One response after the event is for the others in the restaurant to construct or add to their stereotype of a person who would dare to make calls in such a setting. The point is that all such responses underline the expectation that social rules do exist regarding inappropriate calls.

The fact that the use of the mobile phone in public spaces can provoke tensions and conflicts is shown in the British TV talk shows that have discussed the subject - with some emotion. But we need to add a few qualifications at this point. The first is that rules for different public spaces vary: for example, while there may be some negative reactions to calls made or received in shops or on public transport, disturbing a performance at a theatre or cinema is far more serious⁹. Second, there are different degrees of formality¹⁰ with regard to rules about use: in some social spaces such as theatres, some restaurants and school classes mobile phone use has been formally banned. Meanwhile in a number of countries mobile phone operators have now provided etiquette books, much as early landline phone operators did (Fischer, 1992), to give some guidance as to appropriate behaviour. Finally, both the Ling and Sussex study indicated how actual mobile phone users show various degrees of sensitivity to these social pressures, for example, in terms of being discrete (Sussex MTEL, 1998). But clearly it is not only the users who try to keep control over this new technology: there is a sense in which a wider public has an interest in domesticating the mobile phone.

Just as we considered some of the dynamics involved in the mobile phone's relation to work, so there is scope for change in how we experience this technology in public spaces. For instance, whether and how different social groups display the technology in part depends on wider public representations of the mobile phone, on the extent to which it is fashionable and common (as opposed to being the exclusive possession of a few) and on the extent to which the designers pay attention to the aesthetics of the technology, to how it looks and how it can be worn or carried. As for expectations about and reactions to actual mobile calls, a recent cultural history of the Walkman suggests one motor for change. This history, which applies a cultural studies analysis to this technology, discusses the negative responses to the Walkman when it first appeared - for some similar reasons to the mobile phone - and suggests that we might expect a degree of change in public responses as such technologies becomes widespread.

⁹ The recent five country quantitative study for Telecom Italia, cited earlier, showed that mobile phone users were more likely to turn off their devices when present at such spectacles than in other public spaces.

¹⁰ An example of 'persuasion' would be notices on the London Underground asking passengers to play their Walkmans quietly.

'As Walkman use has become a more accepted feature of everyday life - largely by dint of the weight of numbers of people using this technology and the habituation this has engendered among the population more generally - so moral panics over the Walkman have diminished somewhat - often simply to pass on to the latest technologies such as those currently surrounding the mobile phone and the Internet. However, that the Walkman is still not accorded a secure home in the world, that it continues to occupy an ambivalent position between public and private, can be evidenced by simply gauging one's own reaction when someone close to you in a public place and puts on those little headphones.' (du Gay et al)

Contactability

If the last section draws attention to the role of others immediately present in influencing individuals practices and the use of mobile telephony, this section looks at the influence of others at a distance: the potential interlocutors. If we return first to the case of telecommunications in the home, while the other household members present may influence use (e.g. parents' rules about children's use of the phone), so too do commitments to the wider social networks outside the home in which the household and its members are embedded. For example, in the earlier British study cited above, teleworkers were faced with the problems of controlling or otherwise negotiating times when they could be available for contact for work purposes and times when they could be available for the incoming phone calls from friends and family (Haddon and Silverstone, 1993, 1995). But it is not only commitments to the world of work which creates problems of managing contactability. In some current research, Internet access can be a problem because it blocks the home line for other social calls¹¹. Where this might involve, say, blocking calls from elderly relatives who might need some assistance or simply feel the need to socialise on the phone, then the problem is all the greater.

The mobile phone can magnify this issue by potentially creating the possibility of permanent availability. We have already seen why people might not want to take calls in some public spaces. But in addition, there are many social circumstances when calls disrupt whatever people are involved in, just as they can sometimes do in the home. Yet other users feel that the mobile phone has the drawback of potentially enabling those at work, or other household members, always to know where they are. In other words, there is an element of surveillance. On the other hand, while it is technically simple to control incoming calls by turning the mobile phone off or activating a voice mail facility, it is not necessarily so straightforward to deal with the expectations of other people that one should be available¹². This can require negotiation, raising the issue of when to be contactable.

¹¹An observation from the Internet study cited earlier.

¹²For example, de Gourney discusses the differential power to control communication of different types of professional worker (de Gourney, 1994)

This experience can be demonstrated in a second Norwegian study which examines mobile phones in a very particular social space, the 'Hytte', a country home or hut located in the mountains or near the sea (Ling et al, 1998). Here we have to appreciate the cultural importance in Norway of participation in nature, of seeking isolation and seclusion to various degrees so as to live close to nature, to be in communion with it and through that communion to keep in touch with the Norwegian heritage. It is here that Norwegians search for peace, distancing themselves from the stresses of daily life. Some experience the county by camping trailers or tents, but many retreat to the 'Hytte', owned by one in ten Norwegians.

We might have anticipated some resistance to mobile communications to the extent that it threatens this relation to nature and threatens to reintroduce the outside world into their enclave. In practice many of the responses to the mobile were surprisingly positive. First, the mobile provided a sense of security in various senses. After all, because of the great uninhabited areas in Norway, the terrain and the potential sub-zero temperatures, the wilderness can also be a dangerous place - for those driving through it, let alone travelling on foot. So it was the emergency role of the mobile which provided peace of mind for those going to remote places as well as for those family they left behind who might worry about them.

Secondly, taking them mobile allowed them to go to the Hytte while still meeting their responsibilities. This might mean being contactable by older relatives should they be required to return to assist them in an emergency. Alternatively, and more so for higher level male white-collar workers, it allowed them to take time off in the hytte while fulfilling their work responsibilities. Either they could remain ultimately contactable by work should the need for contact arise, or else the mobile phone enabled them intermittently to handle the demands of work while still spending time at the Hytte. As in the early discussion in this article, they could remain on-call.

However, there was indeed some ambivalence about the mobile phone in this social context.

'The hytte is a semi-sacred, but yet vulnerable icon. The fact that one can besmirch it through the purchase of a mobile phone underscores its precarious nature. The mobile phone hinders ones ability to "get away from it all. The telephone allows – or perhaps forces – the individual to blur the work/leisure boundary and blurring of boundaries is a socially risky activity. (...) One informant noted "One is never free from their job. Are we always at work?" Is vacation the time you have between telephone calls? Universal access has its price. "If you have [a mobile phone] there is no choice, you can not tell the difference between work and leisure." Another informant said "The only thing wrong with this is that people can reach me everywhere." (Ling et al, 1998)

Some had in fact resisted having the mobile phone at all. Indeed, in one example a participant reported that their family had received so many calls that they wondered whether they were on vacation at all. In other words, many were still wrestling with the dilemma raised by the mobile phone, even where they had reluctantly accepted it. For

example, this was the case for some of the women who begrudgingly acknowledged that they had to have a mobile because of their partners' work. One solution adopted by a number of those interviewed was to shift the boundaries slightly, accepting the presence of the mobile phone in the Hytte, but not taking it with them when out walking or skiing.

Here then we see the process of attempting to come to terms with a the potential benefits and threats offered by a new technology, to accommodate it, but sometimes only in part. To the extent that there may be an increase in mobility not just in work but in other walks of life, in the amount of travelling we do, in the geographical space over which we operate and are away from a fixed, known phone number, then the dilemmas of contactability could become more widespread. It is also worth noting that at the same time as the mobile phone (and pager) markets have expanded offering instant availability, so has the use of ICTs which enable us to exercise more control over the timing of communication: via the answerphone and more recently e-mail. Hence we might reflect on the implications for one future scenario within the telecoms industry: where fixed telephony disappears and the mobile telephone becomes the only telephone, a personalised artefact which we carry around with us all the time. In this scenario we phone people, not places, with the 'merit' that they are always reachable. The dilemma of contactability, as well as the other sections of this article, indicates that such a development could be more socially problematic than some of the industry anticipate.

Summary

Previous studies of the processes of domestication had always in principle looked outside the home. They had considered, for example, how work, education or other commitments impinged on home life, And they had examined the way ICTs were talked about outside the home as one form of display - a display of knowledge, competence or lifestyle orientation. But as Ling has also noted, to date the main locus of attention has been the home site (Ling, 1998). However this framework of analysis can equally be applied to consider the role of ICTs in other sites of everyday life. In some cases, encountering technologies in contexts besides the home can be significant in determining what ICTs come to mean for people, what role they play in their lives and how they are experienced¹³. This is clearly the case for the increasing range of portable technologies.

A feature of this mode of analysis is that it decentralises any 'main' or 'end' user by recognising the ways in which others (in previous studies, others in the household)

¹³ For example, to understand more fully the popularity of early, certainly British, home computers and especially interest in interactive games, it is important actually to look outside the home to the arcades, clubs and schools where they were played and discussed - where they became an object of interest mainly within a young male culture (Haddon, 1992). The current research cited earlier suggests that nowadays it would be important to consider the experience of the the Internet in work and educational settings to appreciate its adoption in the home.

make some contribution to the whole experience of ICTs. Individual use and individual strategies of control take place in a context where various household members have both commitments, routines and general demands on time and space as well as values, hopes and concerns which all interact and in so doing shape consumption. When we move outside the home we can appreciate equivalent influences, here demonstrated especially in the social relations with those present in public spaces as well as with potentially distant interlocutors.

Lastly, domestication is not a once and for all event, a gaining of control over a newly acquired technology, but it is instead a continuous process as our relationships to even familiar ICTs alter over time. In the case of the mobile phone, this has entailed changes in symbolism, its regulation in public spaces, and the nature and degree of integration into people's daily practices. Moreover, the empirical studies convey a sense that its status may still be unsettled, still in transition, all the more so if it were to move towards a future where it became the core of telephony.

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