

Peter Glotz

Foreword

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Foreword

When I approached René Obermann, the CEO of T-Mobile International, about financing this study in my former capacity as Director of the Institute for Media and Communications Management at the University of St. Gallen, I found him immediately receptive. Our thesis was that the mobile phone, this piece of hardware that is sometimes inconspicuous, sometimes gaudy, sometimes used exclusively for business purposes and sometimes only for building up personal networks, and sometimes even employed cleverly in a wide variety of ways, is changing the culture of communal life: The thing is an artefact, just like the Roman viaducts or the immense water tanks which the missionaries of India's culture used to render the plains of Ceylon fertile. 'The only thing is: The mobile phone is international,' I said. 'But it is used differently in different cultures,' he answered. And then, René Obermann used the term 'thumb culture', a word originally coined in Japan. This term has now become the title of this volume.

Our work progressed through a variety of stages: Desk research, an international expert workshop in London, a Delphi survey, and the editorial work on this book. We identified a scientific community of communications researchers, sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists in the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Hungary, and elsewhere, all addressing the new cultural patterns created by the mobile phone. Our introduction presents the perspectives which changed the lives of billions of people—the acceleration mega-trend, the individualisation of communication networks, the changes that the language undergoes when short messages are sent—remember the terrorist attacks of New York, Madrid, and London?—, the customisation of the mobile phone and its transformation into a fetish, and the process of mobile communication in itself. No more than two decades ago, when pioneers (such as the late Axel Zerneck, a communications researcher from Berlin, or Ithiel de Sola Poole of the MIT) began to investigate the telephone as a means of communication, many believed that this instrument (exclusively served by landline networks at the time) was nothing but a utility channel for communication. Communication by telephone seemed uninteresting because it appeared to have no influence on 'the public' or on 'public opinion'

(whatever that may be). Apart from campaigning, the telephone was not used for propaganda purposes. Today, international communications research has developed a methodology to demonstrate that both the telephone and the Internet are subverting people's communication habits on the sly. Paul Lazarsfeld's classical term 'personal influence' is acquiring a new meaning. An important segment of communication is shifting to the 'new media', circumventing mass communication which was supposed to be the subject proper of communications studies a few decades ago. This development in the history of science is something that cannot be commented on in other but ironical terms.

Falling in with our suggestion was a courageous act on the part of T-Mobile because the ground-breaking technological developments associated with the mobile phone have spawned both positive and negative utopian fantasies, both euphoria about progress and cultural criticism, particularly in Europe. Global corporations sometimes incline towards a philosophy of silent enjoyment or, in other words: Sell but don't discuss problems. This is more wrong than right. Societal discussions catch up with the economy frequently enough, and large enterprises should aim for thought leadership to secure their economic success, which of course is due to smart business models and marketing, for a long time to come.

I should like to thank Stefan Bertschi, the project manager of this study, Chris Locke, who co-edited the book, and Beat Schmid, the Managing Director of the MCM Institute, who held sheltering hands over our heads whenever necessary. Needless to say, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to T-Mobile International which proved itself a wise and unobtrusive sponsor.

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Peter Glotz