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Loading mobile phones in a multi-option society

PETER GROSS AND STEFAN BERTSCHI

In 1994, Peter Gross published a book called *The Multi-option Society* (Die Multioptionsgesellschaft), which became a best-seller in German-speaking countries (Gross 1994). It can certainly be argued that options, the choices facing people in their daily life, are further increasing in a mobile society. This chapter consists of an editorial introduction followed by an interview with Peter Gross, and reveals the connection between “multi-option” societies and the meanings a mobile phone may carry.

A “Multi-option society” refers to the “endless and competitive profusion of new possibilities” omnipresent in modern societies (Gross 1994: 11). This wealth of new possibilities is not only confined to supermarket shelves and the range of services available but also enters the spiritual realm. There is no sphere where the inhabitant of such a society is protected from the options on offer. The inhabitant, however, is by no means merely a passive victim. The underlying phenomenon resembles more the “will for more, to go forward, that is deeply embedded in modern societies and implanted in the heart of modern humankind” (Gross 1994: 11). This striving for “more” is the background noise that has accompanied humankind since the Enlightenment. Modernity is founded on such striving. “Which is why, if you wanted to summarize the comprehensive diagnosis of society made by Gross in a single sentence, you could say: Behind everything, something more, something better is waiting; everything that is more and better is waiting to be realized, and everybody has the right to demand more and better” (Abels 2000: 92). However, sometimes people feel overwhelmed, sometimes they realize too late that they have failed to choose the best option, or failed to even be aware of it (see Abels 2000: 101). Both the growing choice and the act of choosing (made more difficult by the increasing number of possibilities), lead to people feeling under pressure. They are increasingly subject to the pressure of piecing together their individual “jigsaw of life” (Gross 1994: 197).

This provides the background against which new consumer and user trends should be viewed. Due to the multitude of products and

possibilities, people are increasingly struggling to find their way in today's "consumer world". In order to counter such "consumer confusion", products and services today are loaded in multiple ways, both in terms of their qualities and also in terms of communication (i.e. marketing). Amongst other things, it is possible to emotionally load products and services so that the consumer's heart—rather than brain—provides the decisive impulse to buy, binding them emotionally. Through this emotional loading, products and services are endowed with their own character, an image setting them apart from rival products. This is important for competition in today's saturated markets where products, viewed objectively, become increasingly similar. With mobile phones, consumer confusion is primarily due to the overload of innumerable functions, which—and this is the starting point for the concept of a multi-option society—thus far have always been desired (see Gross 2004b: 35). However, in most cases this plethora leads to the functions and services being tried a few times—if at all—then subsequently ignored. The fundamental dilemma between the fascination with the multitude of functions and the overload caused by such increased stimuli is sometimes called "consumer ambivalence" (Otnes et al. 1997). Avoiding ambivalence and confusion requires a clear strategy that is able to convey concise guidance to the consumer about the product and its functions and services.

As if this criterion alone was not difficult enough to meet, something else enters the equation: over time, certain products lose their primary use, which simply becomes taken for granted. The wristwatch offers a good example. The primary use—being able to tell the time—has disappeared (to the immediate benefit of the plastic watch manufacturer Swatch). Because the product's main use—with the mobile phone this would be communication—is no longer visible, it has to be loaded with additional uses. It needs to be assigned a new significance. Such an assignment however is not always advantageous, particularly if it involves emotions. Loading products with emotions may actually confuse the consumer further if these are emotions that the consumer does not wish to associate with the product. This is why today's mobile communication business makes intensive use of customer segmentation models. It is easy to see that, in the main, younger people have their own idea of the "qualities" a product should have, and in which way this product should communicate with them (or be communicated to them). To achieve this, "loading techniques" are brought into play. This means, "that products are not just products but have performance- and customer-related functions." (Gross 2004a)

In order to achieve the relevant loading, it is necessary to consider a product's functions as well as its primary and secondary uses. Whilst the product does not need to be reinvented, it must undergo rigorous communication training. Peter Gross names five registries for

use in loading and training a product in this way: "The first and fundamental registry is 'synaesthesia'. People and things, offerings and products blend different sensory experiences" (Gross 2004b; see Vincent in this volume). A mobile phone may be handled, seen, heard and possibly even smelt. It may be given an optical, acoustic, haptic, olfactory and gustatory loading. Which sensory experience is brought to the fore depends on the individual product. This sensory-centred procedure represents one of the facets of "loading": one denotation of the verb "to load" is, according to Merriam-Webster, "to charge with multiple meanings (as emotional associations or hidden implications)".

The second registry available for use is "rhetoric". According to the communication model of Schulz von Thun (2000), an utterance has a four-fold content: factual information (what I am giving information on), self-disclosure (what I am revealing of myself), a relationship pointer (what I think of you and what relationship I have with you), and an appeal (what I want from you). Each product, each service and each offering carries these four aspects. As with synaesthesia, rhetoric asks the question as to what combination and weighting the contained registers should be used in.

The third registry for use in loading is "aesthetics". What is considered beautiful and harmonic is determined culturally and is reflected differently in a multitude of different lifestyles. The binary opposites of tradition versus the new, or simple versus the complex, could be used as registers within this form of loading.

The fourth registry contains "spatial-temporal" registers and denotes the space and the time window allocated to a product; comprising things like events and promotions. The fifth and last is currently the most commonly used registry for loading offerings: "branding" and "naming": "This also raises the question of when the register of symbols and their significance should be taken into account" (Gross 2004b). In order to be successful, the listed techniques need to generate added value for the consumer. Again, the wristwatch may serve to illustrate this point: its main use (i.e. telling the time) has virtually disappeared. Today, the watch is loaded externally with aesthetics, appeal, trends and brands. Soon, exactly the same situation looks set to apply to the mobile phone too. What then does it mean that products and services have to undergo vigorous communications training? "It means thinking about communication and its partially forgotten registers, no more and no less." (Gross 2004b)

However, subjecting the mobile phone to communications training also means understanding the desires and requirements of the user. One interesting approach, which may be able to marry communications training with these requirements, has been suggested by Christine Mussel (1992). Mussel's "discursive need concept" is based on the realization that a person's needs system is not consistent and contains ma-

major contradictions. The system constantly depends on exchange processes between the person and his or her environment. The system is not only affected by history and society but also by the individual person and his or her current situation. Such dependence makes the system highly instable: it therefore appears clear that needs can neither be ascertained (through market research) nor determined by expert deduction or systematic observation. Mussel's concept states that human needs can only be determined in a situational environment within a discursive process (see Gerstheimer and Lupp 2003). On a different theoretical level, George Kelly's "Psychology of Personal Constructs" (1955) seems to be of interest here. His theory emphasises that communality (social reality) and individuality (personal reality) need to be considered together in order to develop an understanding of the psychological processes. The key message of Kelly's theory is that the world is "perceived" by a person in terms of whatever "meaning" that person applies to it. The same can be stated for such an important tool as the mobile phone.

In actuality, the implementation of such approaches does not seem to function so smoothly. This may be due to the fact that market research and marketing tools are unable to anticipate individual realities. Therefore, what they are actually targeting is social reality. And ultimately it is here, at the threshold of individual and social reality, where misunderstandings arise. They arise because the mobile phone is fundamentally different from other products and services. In principle it is a product like any other. Primarily it is a technical device for the wireless transmission of speech and data. However, the mobile phone is both product and medium and occupies a higher order of media products. Neither the classic landline phone, radio, nor TV set has ever been endowed with such a massive lifestyle factor; they have never impinged on people's lives in such a fundamental way. This is why the consequences too are of a new order, and what we can learn here may be summarized in one sentence: "If design is defined as a complex of projectual acts intending to conceive products and services as a whole, the only way to design properly is to have the user in mind; and the role of marketing (a new marketing) is to have in mind the true project of the consumer, which, paradoxically, is not to consume but to be put in the condition to use properly." (Morello 1995: 70)

The aspects identified here as a starting point, and discussed in the course of the following interview, may be useful for a better understanding of certain trends and ways of reacting to them proactively. A good example is the trend described in the following extract: "People rush through the 'multi-option society' endlessly seeking to experience something more beautiful and better than what they have experienced to date." (Abels 2000: 104)

Interview with Peter Gross

Stefan Bertschi: If you want to explain increasingly mobile and global societies, I think your concept of the multi-option society has lost none of its relevance. Could I ask you to summarize what distinguishes your approach?

Peter Gross: My interpretation is different in that I try to bring together those drivers of modern society normally considered separately, and also to describe the consequences. What I refer to as “drivers” are: individualization (creation of autonomy, soloing), the creation of options, and the freedom from obligations (emancipation). These build the force field that we have to face in an open, free society—and the consequences of which (increasing insecurity, risk and the threat of exclusion) we also have to meet.

In connection with the multi-option society you saw a “panicked mobility” (Gross 1994: 28). Ten years on, how do you see this?

In the course of globalization, mobilization in general has become even stronger and more comprehensive. This means more and more desires arise, and ever more possibilities, which, however, we have less and less time to enjoy.

Do you believe that the effects of mobile phone communication influence your assessment today? Why, or why not?

As a cordless device, the mobile phone is a prototypical product of modern society. On the one hand it increases production through communication, on the other hand it compensates for the increasing distances and hurried mobility.

It can be assumed that mobile communication increases the users’ range of choices in how they may shape their lives. At the same time this choice is made more difficult through the plethora of possibilities. How do you view this? Will it have more positive or more negative effects?

Every beginning is difficult, and that also holds true for the intelligent use of the mobile phone. Only once the device has disappeared, i.e. become taken for granted and integrated into daily life, will this problem be overcome.

Let us take this assumption further: Will human interaction become even more spontaneous and confusing through the influence of mobile phones?

Indeed, I see it becoming more chaotic and more varied at the margins where new users use new technologies. Meanwhile, at the same time "islands" will be created and communicative securities established, which will continue to stabilize the whole thing.

Can the trend towards the mobile phone not also be seen as an "ego hunt" (Gross 1999), as a search for oneself in the mirror of the communication partner? Is the mobile phone nothing more than a means of mutual reassurance? Or is there more to it?

Perhaps you could look at it like that. But I am thinking of "smartvote", an application with which you can be aligned with the identity of others.¹ Sooner or later there will be mobile services that make it easier to choose a product, for instance they might sound a signal when I pass the relevant shelf in the supermarket. Or they will tell me where to go dancing, which has direct implications for other people.

The mobile phone makes us contactable any time, any place. It can be foreseen that this will further blur the border between work and life at least. What role will a multi-optioned communications world play?

Naturally the new methods of communication mean that the border between the worlds of work and life becomes more porous. Here, everyone will have to establish their own boundaries so that these worlds do not get blurred together. I am thinking of, say, children upgrading the home PC and accidentally deleting business correspondence.

The contemporary family is a main strand of your research. In which way do you envisage the use of the mobile phone changing the family?

Using the mobile phone advances the most primal form of communication binding a family together: presence, evidence of being there, the mutual "I'm here".

1. Editor's note: "smartvote is a scientifically developed online election tool for Swiss elections at local, canton or national level. [...] Using factual and opinion-based questions, the political profiles of the candidates are collected and held in a database. Voters are subsequently invited to reply to the same questions, whereupon smartvote recommends those candidates for election showing the greatest political alignment." (see <http://www.smartvote.ch/info.php?mode=idea>). There are other "smart vote" initiatives around the world but none of them are equally well advanced (e.g. <http://www.smartvote.info>). In mobile communication between people, personal profiles will also gain in significance.

On a more general note, will the mobile phone help to dissolve social ties; will they become looser?

Not at all. In this, I am anything but a cultural pessimist or anti-technology. Mobile phone communication makes it possible to denaturalize social ties—which often brings advantages too, in so far as some people, for instance, are able to express themselves better through the new media and maybe even enjoy better social interaction. On the other hand, everyone who frequently uses a flight simulator strives for real flight. This also means the reverse can happen, i.e. that the dematerialized ties possibly ought to be re-naturalized.

What significance would you personally ascribe to the mobile phone today? Or, putting it another way: How would you describe the value mobile phone users allocate to it?

The mobile phone offers a kind of foothold on communicative solid ground in the modern world. Beyond that, it implies manifold secondary functions, such as belonging to a particular scene, lifestyle, etc.

How comprehensive can the multi-functionality of the mobile phone become? Will we ultimately only be able to manage our life with the help of this device?

It is possible that it would be hard for us to renounce this life-support device again. But no animal is as adaptable and disaster-proof as humankind. Humans would survive the end of mobile phone communication and, at the worst, return to smoke signals. But let us not dwell on such apocalyptic thoughts, although looking at the state of the world they do occasionally come to mind.

What happens when everything is within the grasp of technology? Let me couch the question in more sociological terms: Do you think that ubiquitous communication conveyed by technology increases people's fear of missing out on something, of not being able to take advantage of all possibilities?

In one sense that is indeed the case. However, the opposite is evident too: that modern means of communications confirm life in the subjunctive. This means that in principle they promise participation in all possibilities. The "could" is the decisive characteristic of modern life in open societies. The well-known Swiss film actor Liselotte Pulver phrased it like this: "What peeves me most is not receiving an invitation to a party I wouldn't have gone to anyway."

Recently you have been looking at “loading techniques” (Gross 2004a). What is the meaning of your statement that the mobile phone has to be “loaded” properly and to undergo rigorous communication training?

In a recently published paper (Gross 2004b), I systematically name the registers that can be used to load a product (see editorial introduction to this interview). All communication and presentation techniques that people learn also have to be learned by the product. This is why I say that in modern societies with “confused consumers”, not (just) people but the products themselves have to be subjected to communication training. Think of the organist, who puts into place the registers of his instrument in order to be heard in church.

The mobile phone may be loaded in different ways. Which do you personally think are the most central?

Probably the primary *and* secondary functions, i.e. a loading with both the original communication function and, for instance, a user-specific lifestyle function. It depends on the product’s life cycle, as well as on the user. Humans do not consist (solely) of their core function, i.e. procreation, but also exist in secondary functions. Humans do not eat just to satisfy their hunger, or drink only to slake their thirst—except for in emergency situations.

The mobile phone is loaded with meaning by both users and providers. Are these loadings similar or do they differ from one another? And why?

For too long, the mobile phone has only been loaded internally, i.e. with technological options. For too long, product management lay in the hands of the development departments and their engineers. In order for the mobile phone to properly become rooted in the markets, in the way that watches, glasses, and so on have, it has to be loaded beyond its core function (mobile communication) with secondary functions, i.e. with stories, myths, designs, scenes, idols.

What effect will such loading of the mobile phone eventually have on users and their everyday life? And what effect will it have on the communications industry and suppliers?

This will open up huge new markets for the communications industry. Users will want several mobile phones (we would better call them mobile devices) for different uses—as has happened with watches or glasses. And they will want to use them in a way specific to the task or situation. You can see the first signs of that already: for instance with

the 'Mobi-Click'² three-button mobile phone, the colourful 'MYMO'³ kids' phone, or Sony Ericsson's classic multimedia 'T 610' phone.⁴

To finish, let me ask you a very general question: Is mobile communication a social and cultural innovation accompanying the fundamental changes of our time?

That goes without saying. All transport systems, whether for products, for people or for news, have accompanied and counteracted those processes that we call industrialization and modernization, which have led to the split between work and life, between production and consumption, between job and relationship, between living space and friendships, etc. You could perhaps say that the increasing spatial, temporal and social differences of modern societies are being compensated by the multiple possibilities for transcending space and time and for social interaction.

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2. Editor's note: "The simplest mobile phone in the world", according to the Swiss manufacturing company, has only three large programmable buttons and is aimed at the needs of older people (see <http://www.mobi-click.com>). A similar development is seen elsewhere: "The most interesting device, from TU-KA, targets the elderly market, a rapidly growing segment in greying Japan. The 'TU-KA S' is only voice-enabled—no sexy features like e-mail, games, Web browsing, or camera—not even a small black-and-white screen. This no-nonsense Kyocera-made device features large buttons. [...] TU-KA promotes the 2G-phone with the slogan 'no manual needed'. There is a demand for these kinds of simple phones—the 'TU-KA S' is currently outselling all other phones from Japan's smallest carrier." (Blokland 2004)

3. Editor's note: "MYMO is the latest security device that parents can purchase for their children. It is a simple, easy-to-use mobile phone designed for children between the ages of 4 and 8. [...] MYMO is great for parents to keep in contact with their children in an emergency. As it can dial just 5 preset numbers, your children can contact you or another family member if they need you. You can track your MYMO and other family mobiles on the internet." (see <http://www.mymoshop.com/html/mymo.html>)

4. Editor's note: This mobile phone even has its own fashionable website which is designed as an "experimental global community of mobile phone photographers from around the world" (see <http://www.t-six-ten.com>).

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