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Mobile mania, mobile manners

LARA SRIVASTAVA

The importance of being mobile

Today's mobile phone has moved beyond being a mere technical device to becoming a key "social object" present in every aspect of our daily lives. Always-on connectivity and mobility will define not only the future technological landscape, but equally the socio-political one. This chapter focuses on two important impacts of the mobile phone on society: social etiquette and the growing problem of spam.

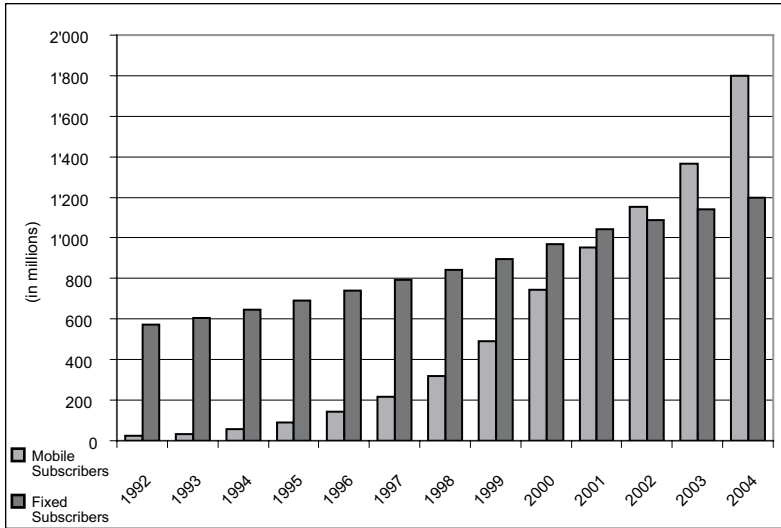
THE UBIQUITOUS MOBILE

The unprecedented and unexpected rise in the number of mobile phone users (see Figure 1) has a number of consequences and implications, but perhaps the most significant impact is on access, both to basic telecommunication services, and to other information and communication technologies as tools for economic and social development. It is also noteworthy that the phenomenon of mobile overtaking fixed has taken place across geographic criteria such as countries, regions, and continents, across socio-demographic criteria such as gender, income, or age, and across economic criteria such as the price premium for mobile (micro) or GDP per capita (macro). The cross-over point occurred in many developing countries (e.g. Cambodia) before it occurred in the developed world. The economy with the highest mobile penetration rate at the end of 2004 was Luxembourg, at about 120 per cent. Hong Kong and Italy hold second and third place respectively. Israel and the Czech Republic complete the 'top five' list. The largest economy, in terms of subscribers, is of course, China, which had over 330 million subscribers at the end of 2004. Overall, it is indeed the Asian region that boasts the highest proportion of the world's mobile users as well as the oldest 3rd generation mobile networks (under the IMT-2000 standards family),¹ which were launched in 2001 in Japan

1. International Mobile Telecommunications-2000 (IMT-2000) is the global standard

and Korea. After a relatively slow start, a number of additional third-generation networks were launched between 2003 and 2005, even in Europe where high auction fees had initially delayed 3G development. Already, research and development efforts are well under way for systems beyond IMT-2000.

Figure 1: Fixed and mobile lines (world), 2004 estimated, Source: ITU.



THE INTIMATE MOBILE

The mobile phone is probably the most talked about consumer product of the last 50 years and has been adopted at a staggering rate across cultures and nations. The English term “mobile” comes from the Latin “mobilis”, which has the following meanings as set out in the 1975 edition of the Concise Oxford English Dictionary:

- Easy to move, movable, loose, not fixed, not firm;
- Pliable, nimble, flexible, agile, swift and rapid.
- Readily changing its expression. Able to change one’s social status.
- In a negative sense, inconstant, fickle and changeable.

The “movable” and “portable” quality of the mobile is of course its key function. However, the mobile has come to mean much more, and the

for third generation (3G) wireless communications, defined by a set of interdependent Recommendations from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

etymological origin of the word may be rather more precise than imagined in describing this modern technology. Whatever its name or nickname, human beings have most certainly developed a fascinating and intimate relationship with their mobile phone.

The sheer physical proximity of this technical device to the human body cannot go unnoticed. Most users are no more than a metre away from their mobiles, at any time of the day. Many sleep with it near their pillow, and use it as an alarm clock. This distance will only be shortened with developments in wearable wireless computing. The Japanese, for instance, have recently released a mobile phone that enables users to listen to calls inside their heads, through a mechanism for the conduction of sound through bone (Srivastava 2004). The mobile phone has indeed become the most intimate aspect of a user's personal sphere of objects (e.g. keys, wallet, money etc). It seems to give users the impression that they are constantly connected to the world outside, and therefore somewhat less alone.

This physical connection with the phone is also accompanied by a strong emotional attachment. Losing a mobile phone can cause disruption and even panic in a user's life. The UMTS Forum concluded in its 2003 paper *Social Shaping of UMTS*, that users have a more "emotional" relationship with their mobile phones than with any other form of information and communication technology (UMTS 2003). The mobile is used to store personal telephone numbers as well as personal messages (e.g. SMS) and pictures that are cherished by the user. Often, these items are not stored on any other device. In some respects, the mobile phone acts as a "mirror" of the self, reflecting the identity of the user and acting as the basis for his/her social network. As a physical manifestation of a user's identity, mobiles have not surprisingly become important fashion accessories rather than mere utilitarian devices. Many young people show off their mobile phones to each other: the ring tones they use and the number and quality of messages stored on their mobile phones can serve to enhance or threaten their social status.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW LANGUAGES

It has been said that learning how to use a new technology is akin to learning a new language. A good illustration is the learning curve among children for new languages: it is widely known that children are much faster at absorbing new languages than adults. Similarly, the younger a user, the faster they take to a new technical development. Mobile phones are no exception, with young teenagers being the most avid users of both cutting-edge and established applications.

With the fast-paced evolution in communication technologies, humans have had to re-invent the language of social interaction. Plain old fixed-line telephones required us to learn to communicate in real-time without any visual clues. The advent of e-mail taught us how to be less formal in our written language and how to speed up our response time to incoming messages. The mobile phone has taken communication to a different level yet again. It is forcing us to discover how to communicate privately in public spaces, how and when to be contactable, how and when to end a mobile messaging “conversation”, and so on. Young users and adults alike are even using new forms of SMS slang and spelling. The mobile phone has had a profound effect on language and communication, thereby challenging established and traditional norms of social behaviour.

Mobile and the evolution of etiquette

THE PRIVATE, THE PUBLIC AND THE POLITE

The ubiquity of the mobile phone in everyday life has meant that the distinction between the public and the private spheres of human existence has become less pronounced. Public places, such as restaurants and trains, are now commonly “colonized” by the private lives of mobile individuals (Geser 2002). As Sadie Plant (2001) has noted, mobiles have created a “simultaneity of place”: a physical space and a virtual space of conversational interaction. In other words, there has been an extension of physical space, through the creation and juxtaposition of a mobile “social space”. This has led to a constant “permeability” (Geser 2002) between the separate contexts of social life. For instance, individuals have often been observed talking on the phone at a restaurant table, while their dining partner either looks elsewhere or is similarly engaged talking or texting on their own mobile device. The intrusion (or potential intrusion) of remote others, in any given social context, has become commonplace, and even anticipated.

Although in some countries (like Japan), there have been efforts to regulate mobile phone usage in public, e.g. through restrictions on use in restaurants and public transport, in general, the tension between remote and co-present social interaction has not yet led to the establishment of any widespread social norms². But some patterns of behaviour are already becoming evident. Two areas of complaint stand out:

2. See the 2004 ITU New Initiatives Workshop on “Shaping the future mobile information society” at <http://www.itu.int/futuremobile> (14 July 2005).

1. *The mobile voice*: many mobiles have loud ringing tones which disturb otherwise peaceful environments. The volume of mobile conversations can be disturbing in public places, forcing people to listen in on private conversations.
2. *Mobile multi-tasking*: the complexity of managing two sets of social environments and context, at the same time (Ling 2002).

THE MOBILE VOICE

It is widely accepted that, typically, a person speaking on a mobile phone (and indeed any phone) has the tendency to speak louder than if they were speaking to a person in their own physical space. Though no clear social norms have yet evolved, therefore, many who answer phone calls in meetings or quiet areas are subject to glances of admonition by others. Loud mobile conversations in public settings are unappreciated. Similarly, a ringing and unanswered mobile phone is often frowned upon.

Nonetheless, there still remain those who will interrupt a meeting with their phone call and carry on speaking in the room where the meeting is being held. There are also those who will continue to engage in staged mobile conversations, or speaking loudly on their mobiles in order to be heard and seen by others, seemingly to build their "social status". Interestingly enough, these mobile "actors" may even do so regardless of whether or not they are on an actual call.

FORCED EAVESDROPPING AS A FORM OF RELATIONS WITH STRANGERS

"Mobile loudness" in public places has meant that the mobile phone user and his/her conversational partner may not be the only ones "involved" in the conversation. Those around them, willing or not, may be privy to the one-way content of their telephonic exchange. This is why users are often seen avoiding eye contact or moving their head (even their entire body) away from those co-present when engaged in a mobile call. These are all means to manage the potential embarrassment underlying the public audibility of private conversations (Murtagh 2002). Most people will agree that they find it rather uncomfortable to be exposed to the private details of another's life. On the other hand, it can be argued this form of "forced eavesdropping" is actually defining a sense of "mobile urbanism", through the bonds it creates between strangers, for instance in a train or restaurant. Without having to speak to each other directly, strangers in urban public spaces can learn about each other through one-way mobile conversations, thereby establishing a form of 'invisible' understanding between those co-present.

MOBILE MULTI-TASKING

Mobile users have had to learn to juggle public physical surroundings with the private space of their mobile conversations. Face to face conversations can at any time be interrupted by a mobile text message or voice call. For instance, when a voice call is received, most users do not hesitate to step away from the social group in their physical space and engage in social interaction with a distant interlocutor on their mobile (Ling 2002). Many people do choose to text (use SMS or email) rather than talk, depending on the social situation they find themselves in. In meetings, participants might text instead of talk. Students sitting in classrooms, or in their room at bedtime, will prefer to text. Texting has the advantage, of course, of allowing users to continue to engage in conversation with those that are co-present, while communicating with a distant third party through furtive “thumb typing”.

Clearly, we are a society that favours multi-tasking not only in the material sense, but also in the social sense. The mobile phone and the “synchronous social spaces” it creates are an enabler of multi-tasking, and in this respect responds to that age-old human need to control space and time. But does being at two places at once enhance or reduce the quality of each individual interactional space? Might “always on” mean that one is losing one’s sense of the “here and now”?

A changing techno-social behaviour

PLAYING WITH PUNCTUALITY

For most users, owning a mobile phone has allowed them to manage their day-to-day life more efficiently. For instance, they can call a friend at the last minute when they are passing by their neighbourhood, to check if they can meet. Appointments can more easily be made and shifted, and also cancelled if required. However, many people claim that mobile phones have led to a form of “impoliteness” among users. A survey conducted in September 2003 by Nokia found that a staggering 89 per cent of mobile users believe that people need to adopt better ‘mobile etiquette’, for example the use of ringing and messaging tones so as not to disturb others around them, and by not shouting and pacing while on the phone. However, according to the results of the survey, 71 per cent of users are now consistently late for social events because of the option to rearrange through a mobile voice call or text. In the United States, a similar survey by Harris Interactive in July 2003 found that 50 per cent of Americans believe that people are generally discourteous in their use mobile phones.

KEEPING OPTIONS OPEN

Have mobile users become less definite about commitments? The “ap-proxi-meeting” seems now to be standard practice: mobile phone users rarely set an exact time and place for a meeting, the excuse being that details can always be worked out later by SMS or mobile e-mail. The habit of “keeping options open” or the “multi-meeting” has also been enhanced by the use of mobile phones, i.e. users often make several approximate and tentative appointments, deciding only at the last minute the meeting they would attend (depending on the value they ascribe to it). On the other hand, it can be postulated that mobile phones have given users more responsibility and have facilitated accountability, e.g. between children and parents or employees and employers.

SPONTANEITY AND THE ILLUSION OF COMMUNICATION

Mobile phones encourage spontaneous communication, for instance through trends such as multi-player location-based gaming and “blue-jacking” (the sending of short anonymous text messages to other mobile phones via Bluetooth). These may provide an outlet for passing the time, but do not necessarily strengthen existing relationships. While admitting to an overall increase in spontaneous and widespread social interaction, some argue that mobile phones may be reducing the quality of face-to-face social interaction. And the ambiguity regarding the social norms that mobile users are to follow in public or group settings seems to further dilute this quality.

Furtive text messaging, for instance, can often give an illusion of strong communication, whereas it is a medium which clearly lacks some of the principal elements of human interaction, e.g. tone of voice, body language, facial expression and touch. Some sociologists argue that texting teenagers run the risk of affecting their capacity to interact with each other on a voice or face-to-face basis: many choose to text rather than to talk, particularly in awkward or emotionally-charged situations.

Moreover, despite the overwhelming availability of communications media (e-mail, fixed-line voice, mobile messaging, mobile voice etc), people are becoming harder to reach. Users are aware of the fact that the mobile phone automatically records a missed call, and typically offers convenient voice-mail services. Therefore, users need not be so concerned about missing calls accidentally, whether this is occasioned by the low volume of the ringing tone or by difficulty of physical access (e.g. at the bottom of a purse). A deliberate form of missing calls, the “call screen”, is becoming more and more commonplace, given that mobiles typically display the number of the calling party. As mentioned above, many now prefer to use the written language to communicate

rather than the richer medium of voice. The mobile phone, universally recognized as a great facilitator of human communication, is now showing that it may also be assisting in the obstruction of it. For the mobile is intimately related to language, which is known to reveal and at the same time to hide, meaning and intent.

Commercial manners: The case of mobile spam

As users develop a more and more intimate relationship with their mobile phones, consumer protection in this area becomes increasingly necessary. Protecting the privacy of users is at the forefront of concerns. This section examines an important aspect of privacy protection, that is to say "freedom from interference". In this context, "spam" or unsolicited commercial communications is threatening to invade mobile phones.

No clear definition of spam has been agreed upon, as the scope of the problem is constantly evolving. Over the Internet, filters and blockers are reducing the volume of spam, but only slightly, and few can eliminate the problem entirely. Spam has now become a significant nuisance for individual Internet users, but is also leading to losses of productivity as employees spend much time clearing their inboxes. Spam includes advertising for dubious pharmaceuticals, from "get rich quick" schemes, gambling, pornography to offers of software and printer cartridges. Some spam messages are fraudulent and others may even contain computer viruses. One of the more serious concerns is the user of "phishing" (or spam and scam), a method using trick URLs. Phishing lets the customer believe that he/she is being linked to an official website (e.g. eBay or Citibank), and then asks the user to re-enter his or her account details.

Governments are attempting to thwart the facility with which marketing companies can currently send spam mail: the United States, for instance, has recently enacted the "Can-Spam Act" of 2003. Like industry self-regulators, governments are faced with the challenge of striking the right balance between fostering valuable commercial innovations and protecting the rights of users. With the use of location-based technologies, and technologies such as radio frequency identification tags, targeted advertising and promotions can reach users at the right time and at the right place. This might prove to be a very useful service for users; but it could also lead to an increase in the number of unsolicited messages appearing on mobiles. Clear opt-in and opt-out systems need to be put into place.

Although the amount of spam sent to mobile phones in most markets is currently much less than fixed-line spam, it will certainly increase dramatically if effective measures are not taken. Moreover, in

some advanced mobile economies, like South Korea, mobile spam has even overtaken fixed-line spam as early as 2003. Spam over mobile networks may indeed pose an even more serious problem than Internet spam, given the personalized nature of the mobile phone, its growing use among young children, and in some cases the cost incurred for incoming messages. Spam also threatens future technological and commercial innovation in the area of mobile shopping, mobile marketing and location-based services. The GSM Association cites spam as one of the top four threats to the future of the mobile industry.

FORMS OF MOBILE SPAM

People trust the mobile phone more than any other form of information and communication technology. The receipt of unwanted commercial messages may threaten this increasingly intimate and trusting relationship. Where unsolicited messages have a visual component, e.g. MMS, illegal images may disrupt a customer's use of new services. Also, cigarette promotions or worse yet, pornographic material, may reach recipients such as minors. As mobile communications become more and more widespread (or "ubiquitous"), the potential for abuse is correspondingly greater.

On mobile phones, spam can come in the form of a text message that pops up on a mobile phone screen, advertising prizes or lewd chat rooms. At other times, it can be transmitted via Bluetooth inviting passers-by to a nearby coffee shop. A missed or 1-ring voice call, or an SMS, designed to solicit a premium rate response is another worrying example of spam, and can imply a direct financial cost to the user. Spam-type content, however, can vary, as does its precise definition. In Japan, for instance, most unsolicited messages, (approx. 80 per cent) advertise dating sites. Messages from operators advertising promotions and game prizes are also common in some European countries. Recently, in Italy, citizens have received an SMS from the Presidency of the Ministry to remind them to vote for European elections. The question of how to define spam remains an open one³.

COUNTERING SPAM

The good news is that it is easier to detect mobile phone spammers than their Internet e-mail counterparts. Messages on mobile phones come from one of a handful of carriers, rather than thousands of traditional ISPs. Currently, it is also more expensive to send spam to mo-

3. See the 2004 ITU WSIS Thematic Meeting on Countering Spam at <http://www.itu.int/spam> (14 July 2005).

biles than to Internet e-mail addresses. The bad news is that this is set to change. First, the exploitation of free short-range technologies such as Bluetooth, will increase the number of location-based spam. Second, the shift towards interoperable mobile and wire-line messaging will mean that mobile phones will receive e-mail just like the fixed line Internet. Japan's mobile phone industry is a good example: a few years ago, the Japanese operator NTT DoCoMo, had already announced that spam was overloading its systems, even freezing some customers' screens. The operator took immediate action. From 25 December 2003, DoCoMo introduced a new anti-spam measure that enabled its mobile subscribers to block all e-mails from user-selected domains. The operator is taking aggressive countermeasures against spam mail sent from its i-mode network, such as limiting the amount of e-mails sent daily from a single i-mode account and suspending or rescinding the contracts of DoCoMo handsets registered to known spammers.

In the United Kingdom, in August 2003, Vodafone introduced programmes encouraging users to forward unsolicited messages to them free of charge. It plans to collate a consolidated report of all the unsolicited text messages forwarded. This consolidated report will be forward to mobile messaging regulators, such as ICSTIS (Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services).

Not only is industry making efforts to address the problem, but legislators are also looking for ways to counter spam. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced in early August 2004 that it planned to set up a list of Internet domains used by mobile phone carriers to help keep spam off mobile phones. The FCC rule will allow marketing companies that don't want to contravene the national anti-spam law enacted last year to check the list to make sure they are not sending spam. The FCC hopes that the creation of a domain-name registry of wireless e-mail addresses makes sender compliance easy and inexpensive.

Of course, it is important for any legislative efforts in this regard to be "technology neutral", flexible enough to cover mobile phones, but also any future connected devices. It is also essential that direct marketing companies continue to develop and evolve their codes of conduct (Sipior, Ward and Bonner 2003). But perhaps one of the key mechanisms for countering spam is to address the main reason behind its popularity among marketing companies: its low cost. Sending spam via the Internet is the cheapest form of marketing. Although mobile spam is slightly more costly, it is still less than traditional print or television marketing. Thus, making mobile spam "uneconomic" may go a long way in tackling the problem. This can be achieved through national and international legislation maintaining or introducing calling-party-pays

system (CPP) and through the withholding of interconnection payments in cases of spam. Operators should also be encouraged to put into place automated reporting facilities and effective response to customer complaints. Filtering mechanisms should be made available not only at the network end, but users themselves must be empowered to conduct self-defence activities on their handsets.

Conclusion

No one can deny the evolving nexus between technological innovation and the human condition. And it is in these early days of innovative energy that society, as a whole, has the rare opportunity to consider the implications of these new technologies. Serious thought needs to be given to the design and implementation of fair policy and regulation in the public interest, to ensure healthy market development, and to thwart disinformation and misuse. Mechanisms and safeguards to be developed by policy-makers should no longer be sector-specific as traditional telecommunication regulation has been in the past. Public policy for the protection of consumers should be wide in scope and include the prevention of abusive and harmful content (including spam and adult content) and the protection of privacy.

This chapter has examined two ways in which the mobile phone is impacting daily human existence: social etiquette and spam. With current advances in mobile technology, as with any new development, it is at, or immediately subsequent to, its introduction that suitable steps can be taken to ensure its proper establishment.

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