

Me, my phone and I: The role of the mobile phone

The Research

The paper stems from speculative research undertaken by Teleconomy about the influence mobile phones have on society and the use of other media. The research is a qualitative study of over 210 early individual (consumers rather than commercial users) mobile phone Internet/data adopters. Primarily the research centres on behaviour — how people behave with their mobiles, why WAP has been adopted now and what the effects on other media usage are. The research is located in a broader context that considers social and cultural issues of identity. Many interesting ideas arose from the research which were not explored to their full extent in the commercial report. This paper provides an opportunity for their development. The research is interpreted using applied frameworks from sociology and philosophy. The frameworks are mainly derived from the work of Anthony Giddens, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. The leading concepts are identity, dialogue and symbolism

Why have a mobile?

More than half of all people in Britain now own a mobile phone. David Teather (2000) comments how these figures confirm one of the most conspicuous social changes to have taken place over the last 10 years. He quotes a spokesman from Orange as saying, *A few years ago people were still debating how many people would have mobile phones and how often they would use them. It is now pretty well accepted that in the next couple of years virtually everyone will own a mobile phone. The debate is no longer about how it will happen but how long it will take.* By 2004, Nokia predicts, cell phones will outpace PCs in Internet connections. Guyon (1999) shows that Nokia is not alone in its belief that the cell phone will become a super-portable computer. Media companies such as CNN, software companies such as Microsoft, and Internet giants such as Yahoo are all angling for a piece of this market. *'Why develop applications for people to use during the little time that they are stuck in front of their PCs?' asks Dominic Strowbridge, Motorola's technology marketing manager for Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. 'Why not use a device that's with them all the time? However, the consumers and users need to be comfortable with the technology: Well, I think people have got to accept it first. They've got to be at ease with it.*

The role of the mobile phone

Perceptions of the mobile phone are already changing; the mobile is taking on a new meaning and has superseded its utility as a medium solely for voice telephony; it is increasingly perceived as a multi-purpose device. The paper addresses these issues, looking at what the mobile actually means to the individual - both the device and the functions it performs. When the mobile phone first came into the market it was indeed just that — a phone that could be used when mobile. As mobile penetration levels have increased so has the ability to do more with it. Aside from WAP the mobile can be used as a communicator through voice telephony and SMS text messaging, an entertainment device through games, an alarm clock and an address book. There appear to be differing views about the role of the mobile phone; some people have not yet widened their view to incorporate the idea of the phone as a multi-use device - *I see a TV as a TV and a phone*

as a phone, while others see the mobile as a device that can encompass a number of tasks: *When I haven't got time to switch on my computer and connect to the internet I use my mobile.*

Teenagers

Peter S. Alexander (2000) explores how teenagers define and re-define the identity of the mobile as a dynamic social technology. He feels that if we limit our view to the mobile phone's present utility we may be ignoring some of the most powerful aspects of it. He notes that because teens may not be as comfortable with more verbal ways of communicating affiliations and interests, the symbolic identity of fashion and style becomes even more important as a catalyst for social interaction within teen subculture. Identity, however, is fluid for all groups, not just for teenagers. The mobile has many functions, not only as a communicator but also as a signifier for identity and an added device for consumption of communication. Always on technologies (GPRS, 3G) will be significant to this group. Connectivity will not only influence their patterns of mobility but will also influence their identities and how they see themselves.

Many social theorists have looked at the importance of fashion in the teenage life. Not only can fashion make a statement about identity, it can also help teenagers to understand their own identity. The mobile acts on many levels, as a fashion statement, as a communicator, as a badge of identity and as a decoder. Undeniably, we all read signs from other people, we decode in effect everything around us. Roland Barthes (1957) develops an approach to identity and consumption, in which he argues that there is always a dual aspect to consumption, that it fulfils a need but that it also conveys and is embedded within social and cultural symbols and structures. A mobile phone, for example, could be used for keeping in touch whilst also signifying an image of the kind of person one is or wishes to be seen to be. The mobile can be tailored to the individual by changing the ring tone, adding logos, stickers, the interface, the colour of the phone and more. Teenagers use mobile phones in an almost semi-disposable way like a piece of clothing or fashion accessory. Jean Baudrillard (1983) notes that all goods have meanings that are generated within the system of signs and symbols which engage the attention of the consumer. Consumption is never a process of a purchaser trying to satisfy a basic pre-given human need in response to biology. Mobile phones meet no biological need. Baudrillard sees the consumer as always actively creating a sense of identity, both individually and collectively. In this sense the mobile can create or reinforce identity, the status of the device is much more meaningful than the actual device itself.

Identity

Nokia state that a mobile phone is the most intimate communications device in the modern world. When providing services into a WAP enabled phone, a company can connect directly with people's lives. Nevertheless, *There's a lot of privacy behind a phone.* Within this private, intimate space identity can be constructed and reconstructed. Giddens (1991) theories about the reflexive project of self-identity are useful in thinking of how the mobile can create identities: Giddens writes, *A self-identity has to be created and more or less continually reordered against the backdrop of shifting experiences of day-to-day life and the fragmenting tendencies of modern institutions.*

As intelligent mobile portals become available the user will be able to select who and what is privileged access through this highly personal device. The mobile phone is positioned above any other medium in terms of a personal device. Mobile phone users are, in Giddens sense, clever people, at home with postmodern uncertainties and skilled in the reflexive reworking of identity.

Extension of the self

So intimately connected with identity is the mobile phone that many people with mobiles have begun to rely on them so much they see them as an essential item, an extension of their self: *It's part of me*. No other device has infiltrated society so widely and so quickly that lifestyles have altered subsequently, and no other portable medium is used so frequently. Traditional forms of communication may be altered by the reliance upon this device, a possibility which the paper will explore in greater depth. The mobile is becoming imbedded within society and is indeed becoming part of the culture of late modern societies. The reliance on this device is profound: *If we said tomorrow right, we'll take your mobile phone away from you, you'd feel like you'd lost your right arm*. No other medium has been considered to be so personal that panic arises when it is lost. *If I had it stolen, I would be dead*. In this sense loss of the phone is likened to physical disintegration. Would the same comment apply to the loss of the computer? It is as if the mobile phone has come to meet a biological need; more, it has become part of our bodies, and therefore of ourselves.

Mobile Phones as Ingestion

The mobile phone is a highly personal object which is often kept close to the self, like a garment. It is also part of a lifestyle. Its proximity is close to that of a body function and its removal has been likened to the loss of a limb. To think so highly of a portable device in this way suggests an important insight. It may be that we need to think of the mobile not in terms of the ergonomics of technology but as something like a bodily function. An alternative metaphor is to treat the mobile as analogous to food. Taking the view that food is a great pleasure in life the following metaphor unfolds:

CONTEXT	FOOD	MOBILE
Personal	Decide what goes in, when and where	Decide when, where and how the mobile is used
Customise	Choose according to individual tastes	Deciding what information infiltrates the mobile, if any.
Consumption	The body ingests, digests and excretes (input to output — a process — cf. cybernetics)	Deciding what to do with the information we receive (voice or mail)
Choice	The choice to eat or not and to be selective	Selecting who and what and when we are contacted
Invasion	If an incorrect meal arrived when ordered at a restaurant we may complain	Unsolicited material on the mobile may be an invasion of privacy
Welcoming	or we may welcome a pleasant surprise	or this material may be acceptable and enjoyable

The future for mobile technology

Giddens has been criticised for the blandness of his claim that reflexive, playful identity construction is within everyone's capacity. He writes, for example, as if everyone in advanced western societies can choose what to eat, or select from a range of available therapies the approach most in line with one's current identity. He neglects the realities of social and economic exclusion. His work is valuable, however, in reminding us also of the negative side of the postmodern experience; the loss of stable, centred identities can produce ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991) and anxiety as well as pleasure and playfulness. One response to that insecurity is an attempt to recover the mythic certainties of the past, a process Giddens (1994) calls fundamentalism. For Giddens, fundamentalism can be defined as the refusal of dialogue, and his desired political alternative is dialogic democracy. Can we see the mobile as a medium for the promotion of such dialogue? Unlike supermarkets, *haute couture* and even the Internet, pay as you go mobile phones are within the economic grasp of almost everyone in modern societies. Can we see the mobile as a genuine social leveller, and thus as a means of defence against ontological insecurity and the fundamentalism it may produce?

Mobile telephony is beginning to affect the perceptions and, more importantly, the use of other content media. The rhetoric around the influence of other media contradicts the actual behaviour found in the research, which shows that there is a shift in media use that entails the incorporation of the mobile to carry out tasks previously performed elsewhere.

As mobile Internet access becomes more widespread and technical limitations are improved, amongst other things the convenience of use may result in the death of the PC for some groups of people. Amongst a number of significant findings the research indicated that in the age group 18 to 25 the home computer was often regarded as outside their normal range of behaviours. In contrast interaction within behaviour with e-enabled phones is regarded very positively, with clear distinctions drawn between personal experiences and content on private devices and more social activities via television.

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