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Mobile forms of communication and the transformation of relations between the public and private spheres

Bob Jeffery

Mobile communications have transformed the way people interact in those countries where technology, economics and policy have intersected to foster its profusion. That much would appear self-evident. Anecdotally we can call up a host of archetypal instances of mobile communications impacting upon our everyday lives in ways which less than two decades ago (in an age of fixed-line telephony) would seem peculiar to say the least. For example; debating the relative merits of brands at the supermarket with your partner over the telephone, an unintended consequence of the call you made to check whether the house is 'ok for milk', your manager calling you 'out of hours' to verify the details of next Tuesday's meeting, the slowly festering annoyance of being held up on a commuter train while your fellow passengers bring their private lives to your inescapable attention, the anecdotes go on and on. However what may have been termed 'peculiar' in the recent past is quickly being absorbed into the 'common sense' of everyday, taken-for-granted, rituals and practices. The classic rationale for mobile phone purchase, 'just in case of emergencies' appears to be in the process of being subsumed by a new generation of teenagers for whom 'ambient co-presence' (or telepresence) and instant reach-ability are quite ordinary features of their social interactivity. This would appear to suggest that the mobile phone – the form of mobile communications on which this study will focus - has like all technological and cultural artifacts (See Spigel, 1990) been subjected to a process of domestication. At this stage I will not enter into further detail as all of these issues will be unpacked in due course. However, suffice to say, that as this process of domestication has occurred relatively recently, the emergent communications practices of the past few years are thrown into relief when compared to the very recent past, and so helpfully highlight many of the social transformations which may be in evidence.

In the course of researching this piece I have encountered many examples of instances in which the mobile phone can be thought to have had an impact on social relations and issues of space, each with their own sociological, cultural, and philosophical accounts and explanations. For the sake of simplicity I have attempted to treat these thematically under the headings: emergent practices, community, 'authority', domestication and etiquette, and space. All that cannot be dealt with under these headings will be reviewed at the end of this piece.

Before we move onto a consideration of these themes however, I would like to consider the philosophical, sociological and political underpinnings of our conceptions of: the public/private dichotomy, the rhetoric of the 'network society' or 'Information Age', the postmodern 'individualistic' self, and the theoretical issues of time/space compression and 'mobile privitisation' (Williams, 1983: 187-9).

Slater's paper on the public/private in Jenks' (1998) 'Core Sociological Dichotomies' provides us with a useful introduction into how space is organized around these two poles. Slater demonstrates the cultural contingency within concepts of space as he traces the category's evolution and transformation from the Hellenistic-Roman period where the *res publica* – the public sphere – was considered the realm of free association for free citizens in contrast to the household (the site of the domestic economy) from which it maintained a rigid separation (Slater, 1998: 138). Slater then pinpoints modernity as marking an epistemological shift in human understanding whereby the public sphere was transformed into a site of danger, competition, public scrutiny and interference (Hobbes: 'Man is a wolf to men'). Slater states: '[...] the private world of the individual, family and intimacy is now commonly regarded as the primary source of authentic values' (Slater, 1998: 139). This conception of the private sphere, dominated by the household, the 'nuclear family' of modernity, as *the* site of intimacy may be seen as critical for this investigation as it is this intimate world's penetration by mobile telephony that is considered by some as a socially destabilising force and provides a rich vein of value judgements for critics of the technology to deploy.

I would like at this point to draw the reader's attention to the contradictory, irrational and somewhat arbitrary nature of the categories public/private, as when Slater argues:

When we think of privacy as the domestic, intimate and familial world, we associate it with (for example) emotion rather than reason, affection rather than competition, nurture rather than manufacture, substantive values rather than monetary or material bonds. (ibid: 144)

Slater goes on to suggest that these categories are anchored in the 'naturalness' of women as opposed to the reason of man. This demonstrates that these categories (like all) are not value-free but contain within them (in the form of binary oppositions) embedded assumptions about power relations, gender roles and the maintenance of a certain social order - we should thus be skeptical about their deployment within a given argument.

The other points of relevance from Slater's arguments are the idealisation of youth in the modern period, which came to be represented in terms of transcendent innocence (as we shall see,

the privatising nature of the mobile is creating new spaces for adolescents in particular which are outside the regulatory regime of their parents). In the postmodern period Slater draws our attention to the 'injunction to authenticity' over the private individual in the public sphere (Sennett, 1977) which can also be seen in terms of a culture of self-promotion, and secondly, the ascendance of 'biopolitics' is cited as a factor which further problematises our understandings of privacy: '[...] the rising therapeutic and counseling professions, consultancies, publications and businesses transform a vast range of private concerns into matters of public contractual relations, expertise, social institutions' (Slater, 1998: 149). What I hope this rather lengthy diversion has demonstrated is the contingency of the categories we are dealing with, but also, that if mobile phones can be seen to be 'muddying the waters' of the public/private divide, then these waters are also being muddied by a variety of other processes.

The second theoretical backdrop to the rise of mobile telephony is what I would term the rhetoric of the Information Age, which has received widespread treatment and debate within cultural studies in recent years, from the prophets (see Wark, 2004; Lash, 2002) to the skeptics (Robins & Webster, 1999; Morley, 2003). The widespread reorganisation of capital – the 'fluidity' of global finance - in the developed West, the ascendance of global communications and digital technology, has transformed aspects of work life, leisure activity and travel. However, I would follow the skeptics in resisting the 'Information Age' as a totalising meta-narrative:

[...] much recent social-scientific investigation of new information and communications technologies (ICTs) has an implicitly critical orientation to totalizing theoretical terms such as the 'information age' or 'virtual society'. (Cooper et al., 2003)

While social and technological developments allow certain classes to transcend national boundaries in an era of 'liquid modernity' (see Bauman, 2000), others remain rooted in locality, and while the Internet and other technologies allow for new opportunities to acquire knowledge, build businesses and develop new forms of community, such technologies are by no means either universally available or universally taken up. Indeed, in the course of this piece there is much continuity I would wish to stress between pre- and post-mobile social action. These continuities challenge the assertion that this 'new' techno-culture represents a complete rupture in methods of thought and action. These technological-discourses will be returned to later in reference to our shifting conceptions of geography.

The third theoretical point that needs to be considered in relation to mobile use is the rise of the 'individualistic self'. I have already made reference to a culture of self-promotion within advanced capitalist nations; this point is elaborated by Bauman (2000: 74):

There are so many areas in which we need to be more competent, and each calls for 'shopping around'. We 'shop' for the skills needed to earn our living and for the means to convince would-be employers that we have them; for the kind of image it would be nice to wear and ways to make others believe that we are what we wear [...]

This culture of individualism/self-promotion (of which I am only scratching the surface) disputes our understanding of the mobile phone as penetrating the private sphere, when it would seem that within certain capitalist cultures there is an injunction to put yourself (your private sphere) 'out-there', to hold yourself up for scrutiny, to be available at all times of the day, to prove your connections (Nardi, et al, 2000), to engage in self-improvement, to multi-task. In this case we need to be wary of the discourses of techno-determinism which posit the mobile as an alien force contaminating the hallowed space of the private, and think instead about the ways in which we adopt this device in keeping with our own agency and value systems (even traditions) and those which are determined by the wider society or culture.

To conclude this introduction, I would like to address a few additional theoretical conceptions around which the ethnographic studies I will use as my examples may be interrogated. The first is that of time-space compression, alluded to above in my discussion of the Information Age, which focuses on how time can be managed and space 'transcended' (to an extent) through the use of technologies as diverse as cars, trains, planes, VCR's, microwave meals, to name but a few. It is suggested by various authors that these technologies foster certain attitudes and obligations to the treatment of time and space within society:

[...] we argue that the mobile phone is a tool that enables one to be efficient by working through a capitalist conceptualization of time as malleable – spendable, wasteable, stretchable and contractible. (Nafus & Tracey, 2002: 215)

Following from time-space compression we have the interrelated concept of mobile privatisation, first posited by Williams (1983), who argues that a variety of technologies have the inherent capacity to withdraw individuals into private worlds, for example, the walkman, the motor car, the PDA and the Ipod, while at the same time allowing those persons freedom of movement,

thus bringing the private into the public. Again it is suggested that this may be a useful schema for understanding the implications of mobile telephony:

Following the ideas of contemporary philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1991), we may say that mobile phone users become immersed in the rhythm of the device, closing themselves off into a 'soliatry' contact with their telepartner (Kopomaa, 2000: 39).

One of the most striking aspects of mobiles is that [...] they are almost always construed as under the ownership of a single person, whereas fixed-line phones are considered a public 'utility', even if the 'publicness' is with respect to the 'private' home (Nafus & Tracey, 2002: 212).

So, in the second item, whereas the fixed line telephone is conceived of as a social resource (shared between the members of a family), the mobile is privatised to the ownership of one, in effect becoming that person's virtual address, on the presupposition that only 'this' individual and not 'that' individual will answer a call.

Emergent Practices

I will now begin an analysis of the aforementioned thematic topics, beginning what I have termed 'emergent practices', although I acknowledge that many of these emergent practices have their roots within quite familiar social processes.

The first phenomena I wish to examine in reference to our poles of public and private, is that of hyper-coordination. This refers to the capacity of the mobile phone to allow individuals and groups to coordinate themselves more efficiently than in the era of fixed-line telephony. The relevance to our question is in to what extent may a new regime of hyper-coordination impact upon traditional notions of privacy. To give an example of hyper-coordination: '[...] sitting in a traffic jam and calling ahead to the meeting to let them know you will be late' (Ling & Yttri, 2002: 143). Indeed, due to these developments Kopomaa (2000) has commented that we may have reached the end of punctuality as a moral obligation. This is driven by an expectation that in giving a reason for being late, you are excusing yourself of any recrimination and, indeed, you are relieving the person who is expecting you of the 'anxiety of uncertainty'. The reason I highlight this example is it represents the expectation of reciprocity in communication without particular reference to where you may be (public or private sphere). That is to say that you may be carrying out some aspect of

your private life (dropping the kids off at school) yet be expected to maintain contact with your public life (work) if the former should make you late for the latter.

The next point I would like to consider is that of ambient co-presence (Kopomaa, 2000) - or telepresence – which refers to an emerging practice of social interactivity, a ‘virtual’ aspect of a relationship which reinforces a sense of ‘closeness’ (even intimacy) between the individuals involved:

The mobile phone network allows users to maintain the feeling of closeness in the form of telepresence, without actual physical proximity: because of the continuous accessibility offered by the phone, other people are always present. (Kopomaa, 2000: 46)

The establishment of intimacy and the transference of pre-mobile communicative behaviours into the space created by mobile telephony have been noted by various authors; Mizuko Ito describes how her interviewees likened a text message to establish if a friend was awake (before initiating a voice call) to a ‘[...] long distance tap on the shoulder’ (Ito, 2001: 8). She also suggests that text messages about ‘trivial stuff’, which does not seek a response (such as ‘I’m sleepy’), are strategies for entering someone’s ‘peripheral vision’. The metaphors of ‘real’ presence that we find are striking. Perhaps we can then postulate that these actions are developments from strategies of communication in real presence to those of telepresence.

At this point I would like to say a few words about Georg Simmel and his theories concerning the city (see Bridge & Watson, 2002; Cooper et al, 2003). Simmel argued that the city is fundamentally alienating in the way that individuals are drawn together while existing as strangers to each other (we will return to this concept in our later discussion of etiquette). We may also argue that in the ‘city’ familial and friendship networks are stretched across the city, and that individual ‘nodes’ within the network may be seen as isolated within a sea of unfamiliarity. I don’t want to stretch this point too far as I am certain that large numbers of individuals are perfectly familiar with their locales and neighbours, but as a general statement I think it holds ground. In this situation, the social actions of a tap on the shoulder or entering someone’s peripheral vision (facilitated by the technology of the mobile phone) may be seen as ‘normal’ socialising actions (albeit carried out from afar) transformed to suit this new media.

I now want to think about how these emerging practices are impacting on the social aspects of work. Plant has argued that while the conversations of fixed-line telephony are ‘[...] entirely integrated into the scripts and procedures of working life, the mobile makes it likely that even important business calls will be received in very different contexts’ (Plant, 2002: 50). This may be

seen as one example where the boundaries of public/private are blurring, but again needs to be seen in the wider context, namely, the restructuring of work life - especially for the professional classes - characteristic of advanced capitalism. In their paper 'It's not what you know, it's who you know: work in the Information Age', Nardi et al. (2000), drawing on the work of Castells (1996) and Latour (1996), stress the requirement to network in certain professions. They argue that collaborative workers are no longer as likely as they once were to be co-located (in the same building or the same company), and that the rise of businesses which outsource, sub-contract, collaborate or deal with dispersed media and government agencies means that the maintenance of social/professional networks assumes a key role, for example:

We found that workers experience stresses such as remembering who is in the network, knowing what people in the network are currently doing and where they are located, making careful choices from among many media to communicate effectively with people, and being mindful to 'keep in touch' with contacts who may prove useful in the near or distant future. (Nardi et al., 2000: 4)

While only being one of various media utilised by these workers (including email and fax), the mobile had a clear role in the management of these professional relationships. The use of the mobile as something which transgresses the boundaries of the public and private is also accounted for by some of these workers (domestication), as with this respondent who explains her strategies for negotiating this liminal zone:

Rachel (respondent): I talk to them. I realize that they are in their home setting. I don't call them up and talk business right away. [...] For example, one of my programmers off site is working on fixing up his house. I'll call him up and say, 'Hey! How's your floor going? or 'Your windows!' and kind of get into his world. [...] It's just sometimes invasive or intrusive [the business call], and you need to walk a fine line whereby you have that kind of intermediary language. (Nardi et al., 2000: 20)

While clearly, this is only representative of a certain limited sector within the workforce, it illustrates how the less-clearly-defined borders of public/private spheres are being organised to take account of mobile telephony and other mobile communications.

Another example of the impact of mobile telephony within social networks is offered by Ling and Yttri (2002) who describe the practices of school children in Norway who utilise the

mobile to maintain contact during lessons. Ling and Yttri suggest that in this situation the mobile phone is taking the place of the 'passing of notes' as a way in which children communicate illicitly. One of their respondents, 'Erika', explains how a boy who is interested in her will not speak to her face-to-face but 'dares' to send her a message. Again, the continuity between the old practice, of passing notes, and the new practice, of sending texts is striking. Ling and Yttri also highlight the potential for reflexivity embodied in this technological form:

An SMS message allows one to compose the text deliberately and perhaps confer with a jury of friends about the content. The message goes directly to the individual, meaning that there is no need to broadcast one's interest to the other person's parents by using the family telephone. (Ling and Yttri, 2002: 161)

Issues around the 'concealment' that this technology affords are a recurring theme, but are expressed in a multitude of practices. Plant (2002) observed in the course of her research that 60% of lone women identified in cafés, bars and other public spaces displayed their mobile at the table at which they were sat. When asked the reasoning for this action, many responded that it was a valuable means of keeping unwanted attentions at bay '[...] and can even legitimise solitude: I'm not alone, I'm with my mobile phone' (Plant, 2002: 42). In another study, Cooper et al., (2003) describe an event in which a girl (on a train) receives an upsetting phone call, begins to cry, and then plays with some function of her phone to avoid the gaze of her fellow passengers. The researchers suggest that a potentially embarrassing display of emotion is handled by a 'systematic avoidance of engagement with co-present others' (Cooper et al., 2003: 293). The point is that these actions, avoiding attention/concealing embarrassment are not 'new' social phenomena, rather, that the mobile has been enlisted and adapted to suit these purposes, and secondly, that the mobile phone can be an instrument to create privacy (mobile privatisation) rather than simply being a device which shatters it.

In other areas related to this topic of 'concealment' we find people reporting that it is much easier to lie to others through their mobile phone (especially with SMS messages) - which conceals the physical aspects of communication - with some individuals reporting that they had two selves; a real self, and an SMS persona (Kasensiemmi and Rautianen, 2002: 179-182). We even find a respondent who was suspicious of her husband getting a second mobile (even though she had two herself) as this mobile would constitute a second address through which an illicit affair might be conducted (anecdotally, I once worked with a man who maintained *three* mobiles for this very purpose). I will return to these issues below when I consider the theme; 'authority', for the moment

it is sufficient to note that these concealments may be facilitated by the absence of a socially disciplining public sphere.

Community

I would now like to take a brief look at the implications of mobile use on community. While in countries such as the UK, few functions beyond text messaging, taking pictures (but not sharing them to any great degree) and WAP phones have been widely adopted, whereas in Japan, the established Imode internet service offers the full range of internet options (see Rheingold, 2003), with the advent of 3G, the recent introduction of the Imode service to the UK and the possibility of television on your mobile, the full range of social uses of these features may be considered in tandem with the more traditional uses of the mobile phone. However I would like to keep my observations at a general level, as too little ethnographic research exists for these emerging functions.

Community is a useful lens through which to consider our primary issue of the public/private (as this is the site where the two spheres intersect). To the extent that mobile phones 'privitise' individuals from one another they could be held to be damaging to the public sphere (in contrast to the argument that they penetrate the private sphere). On the other hand, if through their various uses they can be utilised to foster community, the mobile could be seen as strengthening and/or preserving public sphere (though perhaps not in its current format). The fluctuating form of the public sphere is illustrated in Gitlin's paper 'Public Sphere or Public Sphericles' which argues that a unitary public sphere is weakening in response to audience fragmentation, but that '[...] distinct communities of information and participation are multiplying, robust and brimming with self confidence' (Gitlin, 1998: 170). Gitlin's arguments relate primarily to the Internet as a meeting place for virtual communities, but as we shall see there are many potentially socializing functions to the mobile as well. Rheingold (2003) reports that the use of mobile dating agencies is widespread among Tokyo's youth and young adults, and argues that the text function was adapted to social ends in the same as was the 'chat' option on the Minitel (which was not anticipated to be a major function), France's early precursor to the Internet. Elsewhere, Plant (2002: 75) discusses the role of texting in the overthrow of President Estrada of the Philippines and the anti-globalisation protests of Seattle and Genoa. More recently we may look to the rioting in the Parisian *banlieue*, as an example where texting has been deployed to organise protests.

Before I illustrate the issue of community with more prosaic, less-exceptional accounts of mobile community, I would like to address two more theoretical issues. The first is again raised by Gitlin (1998), who describes the emerging gap between the 'information rich' political classes, and

the 'information poor'. The second raised by Slater who stresses the need for "[...] publicity" – in the sense that some actions be carried out under the cold scrutiny of the collective citizenry – is crucial to democracy' (Slater, 1998: 141). We may thus suggest that the penetration of the private sphere by an increasingly multi-functional mobile technology could in fact be advantageous to certain groups, others (who for instance may be able to afford a phone, but not monthly Internet subscription) would fall behind, and while the realm of the private may be left untouched by the intrusion of mobile-Internet, their access to public life (political participation, employment) may be impeded by dint of their status as 'information poor'. To give examples of this, the London congestion charge can now be paid by text message, and government policy reviews in recent years have favoured the increased use of ICT's to deliver services (see Van Winden, 2001). This point demonstrates that the public/private dichotomy is by no means clear cut, and should not be treated as such.

To return to our examples of 'mobile community', Ling and Yttri (2002: 162) describe the use of idiomatic slang within texting groups in Norway:

The use of slang, that is newly created words used by a limited group, denotes the group as unique and separate from other social groupings. It provides the group with a sense of intimacy and in-group solidarity.

Again, I would like to stress the normal, everyday use of slang, in particular by school children, and suggest that the use of collective messaging in this way represents a form of continuity in terms of social actions. As for the issue of disturbing lessons, we will return to this theme in our discussion of etiquette.

Finally in this section, I want to consider what I have termed 'mobile media events', derived and inspired by Dayan and Katz's work on televisual 'Media Events' (1992). In this work they suggest the unitary influence of mass communication's 'high holidays', events such as the burial of President Kennedy, the wedding of Charles and Diana. The unifying impact of more everyday national broadcasting can also be seen in the work of Scannell (1990) and Silverstone (1997). In terms of live mobile events, the format can barely be described as being its infancy, to date there have been a few small concerts transmitted by 3G. However, with the recent purchase of Greenwich's Millennium Dome by entertainments group AEG and mobile provider O2¹, plans are in the process to broadcast large scale events to mobiles. Again, I do not wish to speculate too much on events yet to take place but I would say this has the potential to challenge the some of the concepts found in Dayan and Katz: 'Media events privilege the home. This is where the 'historic'

version of the event is on view, the one that will be entered into collective memory' (1992: 22). Rather than just thinking about how the mobile may penetrate the home, we might also like to think of the ways in which it is disembedding some of the established functions of the home and allowing them to be performed 'outside' in 'non-traditional' settings.

'Authority'

Following on from my earlier reference to 'concealment', in this section I will be taking a deeper look into the ways in which mobile telephony can be seen to open up or create new spaces outside of traditional systems of authority or regulation. However, it is crucial to understand that these systems are subject to change regardless of the impact of the mobile phone. For example, the restructuring of social housing in many British cities during the 20th century could be cited as an example of the 'scattering' and displacement of disciplining familial networks, as Cohen argued in his 'Rethinking the Youth Question' (1985, especially, chapter 2). The crucial point to make is that a variety of contextual factors influence the potential uses of mobiles (or for that matter any technology), and that its uses should not be seen in a vacuum, as it were.

The first example I offer concerns adolescents, adolescence being a time when children are perhaps less concerned with their family and more concerned with building peer relationships: 'The mobile [...] taps into that in that it provides adolescents with their own personal communication channel' (Ling and Yttri, 2002: 162). The example of Japanese youth (eg Ito, 2001: Rheingold, 2003) illustrates cultural specificity in the power relations of public/private:

The Japanese urban home is tiny by middle-class American standards, and teens and children generally share a room with a sibling or parent. Most college students in Tokyo live with their parents, often even after they begin work, as the costs of renting an apartment in an urban area are prohibitively high. (Ito, 2001: 4)

In these circumstances it is easy to understand why mobile take-up amongst Japan's youth has been so high; it is deployed to create spaces of privacy between peers beyond the regulating 'gaze' of the parent, as with this respondent:

Student1: We don't [visit each other's homes]. It's not that we are uncomfortable, or our parents get on our case, but it's like they are too sweet and caring, and you worry about saying something rude. You can't be rowdy. So we don't meet in our homes (Ito, 2001: 5).

Ito then deploys Massey's (1994) notion of the 'power geometries of space' to suggest that the mobile phone is used as a tool to overcome the limitations of: being able to do what you like at home, but having no access to your friends, and of being at school, having access to your friends but not being able to do what you like. The enlistment of any tool which allows adolescents to overcome their deficiency of power in relation to their parents and the wider society is neither a new nor surprising phenomenon, I would argue. If we try to see the continuity in the way in which the familiar form of 'teenage rebellion' (for want of a better word) is adapted to the options facilitated by mobile telephony, we should be able to resist any simple notions of technological determinism. Incidentally the inverse of this use of the mobile phone is suggested by Nafus and Tracey (2002: 212), namely, the mobile as a 'digital leash' with which parents can monitor their children. Nafus and Tracey further cite the suggestion by Hirsh and Silverstone (1992: 15-31) that the household forms the center of a 'moral economy', and I would suggest that this a useful frame for us to use when contemplating the fear or anxiety expressed in relation to intrusions into this hallowed space.

I would like to continue with a few more examples of mobile telephony's circumvention of authority. The first is taken from Rheingold (2003: 32) who describes the collaboration of 'fare-dodgers' on Stockholm's public transport, who exchange SMS texts to alert one another to the presence of ticket inspectors. Here we could suggest that a 'private' network is established to circumvent the regulatory regime of the public sphere. Perhaps more interestingly, Plant (2002: 56) highlights the case of a woman in Dubai who was able to contact her fiancé through her mobile (sometimes while watching him across the street) though she was unable to meet him face-to-face due to restrictions imposed by traditional custom. In this scenario, we may hypothesize that in circumventing traditional customs, the uses of mobile telephony may have the ability to enact cultural change (indeed Plant explains that mobile use is strictly forbidden amongst young girls in parts of Afghanistan for this very reason). And finally no discussion of mobile telephony, illicit behaviour and authority would be complete without reference to the phenomena of happy slapping. At its inception around the beginning of 2005, it was seen as a singularly British experience, the conjunction of camera phones and traditional British 'thuggery'; however, this is no longer the case, and incidences have been reported across Europe². The point I would like to make is that this deviant use must be seen in the context of the social conditions in which it arises, and of the agency of the individuals who commit such acts, not as an inherent feature of the technology itself. However, having said this, writers such as Sontag (1977) have argued forcefully for the role of images, and the investments humans make in them, to be acknowledged; following this philosophy, it should be possible to conduct research into the uses of cameraphone images as psychological

investments. Indeed my original desire with this piece was to focus on the advent of the camera-phone in an age where the injunction is, as noted by Bauman (2000), to self-express. However, while some research exists on this topic (see Van House et al., 2005, 2005a; Okabe, 2004), it is still early days. Furthermore a lack of agreement between developers over a single file sharing format and the high cost of picture messaging has prevented this form of communication from becoming as ubiquitous as text messaging. To return to our discussion of ‘happy slapping’ I would argue that the space in which the most violent attacks occur are often private, in the sense of being hidden from the view of the public, but that through their cameraphone recording they *can* enter the public realm, and even be used as evidence against the attackers³. But no simple causal connections between the technology and social action can be drawn here.

Domestication and etiquette

I would now like to take a brief look at the way the mobile’s disruption of the traditional public/private divide is accounted for by individuals in their everyday life. In Cooper’s article: ‘Mobile Society: Technology, Distance, Presence’ (2003) we find the invocation of Goffman’s (1959) concept of ‘civil inattention’, that is, the systematic avoidance of ‘other’s’ gaze when in public scenarios (such as public transport). This is due to the fact that eye contact constitutes the realm of the private and intimacy and is considered inappropriate with strangers in that it penetrates their private sphere. What we find in mobile use in public, is that people adapt their bodily movements and gestures to maintain the barrier between their private phone call and the etiquette which is demanded in public situations. For example, on a confined space such as a train, individuals are observed moving to a window seat, looking downward or away from their fellow passengers, or using their hands to shield their faces from view (Cooper et al., 2003: 291). In more public areas such as the ‘high street’ we find space managed in other ways, people retreat into corners, or with their back against a wall facing out, to create the illusion of privacy (Kopomaa, 2000: 43-5). Elsewhere Plant (2002: 38) describes ethnographic research which concluded that the diners in restaurants around London’s Covent Garden were more likely to have their mobile on the table at which they were sat if that restaurant did not have table cloths or waiters in attendance, suggesting that people are adapting their mobile use to the perceived degree of etiquette required in varying social situations.

Aside from averting the gaze, Cooper also argues that it can be used as a method of disciplining co-present others whose conversation is intruding into one’s space: ‘[...] the management of gaze and gesture in public becomes one of the ways in which the boundary between public and private is negotiated [...]’ (2003: 294). It has been suggested elsewhere that

this ability of being able to switch ‘in and out’ of public and private space is fundamentally alienating to those in your company:

Cell phone conversation typically establishes an ‘inside space’ (‘we who are conversing’) vs. an ‘outside space’ constituted by those within earshot but prevented from participating. The fact that ‘it doesn’t matter whether you [the co-present other] listen or not underscores the insignificance of the outsider’. (Gergen, 2002: 238)

This could certainly be a factor in the irritation experienced by co-present others, even those who are known to the person on the mobile (see Ling and Yttri, 2002; Plant, 2002). This said, increasingly we are seeing normative behaviour patterns established in sites as diverse as the workplace, the cinema, the school, the hospital, public transport and many other areas of public life. Indeed accepting a call in these situations is most often met by embarrassment on the part of the recipient and disciplining stares on the part of the co-present others.

Space

Much of what I have discussed so far has been implicitly related to concepts of space, management of space and the regulatory regimes of different spaces. However in this segment I would like to address space explicitly and in the wider sense by relating mobile use to a putative ‘end of geography’. Meyrowitz (1997: 42-50) in particular has argued that the electronic media permeate and ‘soften’ what were ‘hard’ physical boundaries, bypassing ‘passage’, that is, the movement across liminal zones which previously may have been a time to re-adjust ourselves from one regulatory system to another, from a public mode to a private one for example. Nevertheless, I would resist Meyrowitz’s somewhat moralistic tone: ‘[...] electronic media invades places [...]’ (1997: 49) as an oversimplification. A similar line of inquiry is suggested by Gergen, whose specific argument is that the advent of printing created a situation in which, for the first time, ‘absent voices were now present and, as they are absorbed, the claims of local community are diminished’ (Gergen, 2002: 228). His argument follows that this situation is exacerbated by the rise of television, radio, the internet and mobile. In any case, I would suggest that the alienation from locale also be seen in the context of densely populated urban living, and increased mobility.

On the other side of this argument, we find the reassertion of geography; Morley for instance notes the continuing pertinence of the question ‘where are you’ (Morley, 2003: 44). This allows the participants to adjust language to match their understandings of given contexts and

situations; furthermore it perhaps also provides some form of reassurance against the 'place-lessness' of the co-present other. Perhaps the most appropriate suggestion is that of Cooper's:

The logic of this argument would suggest that a reconfiguration of space and time is taking place, a reconfiguration that implies that the form and purpose of the communication is what comes to describe 'public' and 'private', rather than the space in which that communication is carried out. (Cooper et al., 2003: 291)

We can thus argue that rather than place disappearing (Meyrowitz), it is being reconstituted in forms more appropriate to the organisational and technological structure of society; an epistemological shift. Interestingly, the camera-phone offers a possibility to constitute space in an entirely different way again; however as noted earlier, the form is still in its infancy.

I would now like to consider two more theoretical points relevant to this debate. First, that of intergenerational difference; the rapid development of technology often creates a situation in which the attitudes of older generations are at odds with newer generations who have 'grown up' with a certain technology (see Ling and Yttri, 2002). This may be one way of interrogating discourses of technology which posit an explicitly moral argument. Secondly, we may find it useful to consider the mobile as a totemic object: '[f]etish-object rather than medium, the mobile phone has the ability to fulfill all fantasies of power and exclusive possession of the person close to one, such as one's mother' (de Gournay, 2002: 201; see also Leal, 1990). This concept is a constructive way of thinking through the 'need' felt by individuals to be in possession of their mobile, and its consequent extension into situations previously considered private.

To conclude I would like to identify some of the core themes of this work and attempt to make some general statements about the notions of public and private in the age of mobile telephony. First, that society, seen from the perspective of bi-politics, changes in Capital, or Simmel's urban alienation, has been subject to immense changes in our conceptions of the public, the private, and of human liberty. Any theoretical explanations of mobile use must address these contextual issues. Secondly, that much continuity ('long-distance tap on the shoulder') exists in terms of social actions, alongside adaptation ('hyper-coordination'), and domestication. Thirdly, that we can identify fields where mobile communications appear to be facilitating new actions, in terms of; community organisation, the possibility of contributing to cultural change (the women conversing with her fiancée in Dubai), of creating new divisions ('info. rich and info. poor'), of privatising individuals, which could be seen as contributing to a weakening of the 'traditional' public sphere, and of reconfiguring our notions (but not weakening the importance) of geography.

These last points can arguably be seen as forms of technological determinism in that the technology allows certain possibilities; however, any social determinants should never be viewed in isolation, and one should resist either a totalising or moralising approach which fails to take account of socio-cultural specificities. Finally I would like to echo the sentiments of Agamben in relation to proposed explorations of the public/private divide:

When you take a classical distinction of the political-philosophical tradition such as public/private, then I find it much less interesting to insist on the distinction and bemoan the diminution of one of the terms, than to question it's interweaving. I want to understand how the system operates. [...] in order to understand what is really at stake here, we must learn to see these oppositions not as 'di-chotomies' but as 'di-polarities', not substantial, but tensional (Agamben, 2004: 612).

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Notes

¹ see <http://www.techdigest.tv/> January 25, 2006. Accessed 13 March 2006.

² 'Happy Slapping Hits Germany' at <http://www.textually.org/picturephoning/archives/2006/03/011816.htm>. Accessed 17 April 2006.

³ See the case of David Morley 'Happy slapper denies killing' at http://icsouthlondon.icnetwork.co.uk/0100news/0400lambeth/tm_objectid=16385876&method=full&siteid=50100&headline=happy-slapper-denies-killing-name_page.html#story_continue (accessed 15/04/06)