

Mobile Phones: Definition, Discourse and Rules of Practice

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research project which investigates the social and cultural effects of mobile phone use. Examples from my research to date reveal that the communicative practices of mobile phone users are the result of a dynamic mix that is shaping an emerging new discourse; as mobile phones are used in, and are affected by the specific cultural and interpersonal dynamics of contexts. My research examines how mobile phone use is reshaping how we engage with our culture, and considers what discourses feed the meanings we have for mobile phones. This paper illustrates that the use of the mobile phone for interpersonal communication involves a complex negotiation that affects our relationships at home, with the public, with peers, as citizens, and in the workplace.

Introduction

A television cameraman who survived the crash of the Garuda flight in Indonesia yesterday called a colleague as the airliner caught fire and passengers tried desperately to escape the inferno... He phoned up as it was crashing... He was screaming 'the plane's crashing'" (The Herald, 2007, pp .1-4).

Here was a working cameraman calling in a story on a mobile phone as he faced death in a plane crash. The call had both personal and work related consequences. This example also demonstrates how mobile phones are reshaping how we engage with our culture. My contention is that mobile phones have become powerful cultural objects that affect our relationships at home, with the public, with peers, as citizens, and in the workplace.

The needs of the news media and the individual survivor can converge with this technology when personal, occupational, social, commercial and technical discourses weave together to convey a message with great immediacy and effect. The mobile phone and its use do not exist isolated from larger societal discourses (Howarth, 2000). The specifics of how mobile phones are used connect with, and are affected by, the intimate relationships they make possible with the broader discourses that exist within the whole society. It is not possible to understand the specifics of personal use without acknowledging the broader socio-cultural context: the discourse of mobile phones is shaped by other discourses connected to the contexts in which mobile phones are used.

This paper reports on preliminary results for a larger research project. My research is focused on 18 to 35 year olds who live in the Hunter region of New South Wales, Australia. The research uses conventional qualitative methods of data collection (Mason, 1996; Neuman, 2000; Priest, 1996; Travers, 2001). Specifically, I have used ethnographic methods of data collection and analysis. Semi-structured interviews, communication diaries, participant observation (via a Research Observation Diary), discourse analysis, and observation and analysis of material culture are the multiple sources of evidence that have been triangulated in this research. My interest centres around the social and cultural consequences of mobile phone use as it affects relationships at home, with the public and peers, as citizens and in the workplace. My research considers how identity and agency may be affected through the use of mobile phone technology. In this paper I will not be discussing the use of mobile phones for email, games and instant messaging, however, I will be covering a selection of formal and informal rules, and examining examples of social practices (such as calling, texting and answering or responding) that have been normalised into a code, or etiquette, through social negotiation.

What is a mobile phone? What does it mean to be a mobile phone user? And what ideas does our society hold, perpetuate and develop about mobile phones? At the beginning of his book, *Constant Touch: a global history of the mobile phone*, Jon Agar 'deconstructs' his mobile phone with a hammer and in doing so illustrates that the mobile phone is made of many different materials which are sourced from all over the world (2003, p. 14). However the mobile phone holds many more meanings than the sum of its chemical and physical compounds.

It is my intention to focus on the *use* of mobile phones not the objects themselves. My aim is to demonstrate that there are numerous elements that affect society's perception of mobile phones and these, in turn, colour the way mobile phone users perceive themselves.

Sara Mills describes a discourse as a “set of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think” (Mills, 1997, p. 62). In this paper I will show (using examples from my research to date) how some of these sanctioned statements associated with mobile phones can illustrate the formation of a new discourse related to mobile phone use. While this remains fluid, there are certain practices that are, or are becoming normalised.

The mobile phone is a technological communication device created for making mobile telephone calls; calls to *people*, not places. It is useful here to reflect on the work of Raymond Williams in his book *Television: technology and cultural form* (1990) where he explores the ‘relationships between television as a technology and television as a cultural form’. He comments,

We have then to try to clarify, first, the new technology and, second, the effects this may have on institutions, policies and uses of television. But we have to do this while remembering that the technology will not determine the effects. On the contrary, the new technology is itself a product of a particular social system, and will be developed as an apparently autonomous process of innovation only to the extent that we fail to identify and challenge its real agencies (1990, p.135).

As ‘a product of a particular social system’ the ownership and use of a mobile phone has many meanings and consequences in Australia. “The mobile is a symbol in itself, an obscure object of desire and a sign of the times” (McGuigan, 2005, p. 46). The ownership and use of a mobile phone in our society involves an ever-changing variety of meanings, these include: being wealthy (the well-to-do yuppie); being business orientated; being a people person; being ‘upwardly mobile’ and having a modern flexible lifestyle; wanting to be contactable; being hip and happening; being up-to-date; being technologically advanced, and being ‘normal’. In fact we could say that this is really changing, now that globally 50 percent of the population has a mobile phone. (ABC Online News, 2007)

The ‘normalisation’ of the mobile phone as a necessary part of the communication process has been rapid. Within 10 years, across Australia, ownership has moved from rare to required. To choose not to use a mobile phone is, in 2007, a little eccentric.

How does possession of a mobile phone affect the way users perceive themselves? And how does this affect a user’s negotiation of their own agency within the broader culture? One way to identify the meanings we have associated with mobile phones is to consider the formal and informal rules applied to their use. My research aims to identify how the formal rules we create to maintain or restrain use by individuals are either applied or resisted.

There is a legal requirement to stop the car and turn off the engine before using a hand held phone. “The driver of a vehicle (except an emergency vehicle or police vehicle) must not use a hand-held mobile phone while the vehicle is moving, or is stationary but not parked,” (ATC, 1999, p. 307). The penalty for not doing so is an infringement fine of up to \$250. However my research shows that these rules are not commonly followed. When asked “do you use your mobile phone when driving?” a common response was,

Yes, I do. I consider myself to be a good driver but, I know that I can multitask and I never do it for long. It would only be like, ‘Okay I’m driving at the moment. Can I call you back when I get to my destination or whatever?’ (Melinda, 2006, i/v).

This participant's comment illustrates that although there are formal rules within the discourse, which individuals are aware of, they use their own agency to negotiate these rules.

There has recently been a new proposal to ban "first year P-plater drivers using a mobile phone whether with Bluetooth or hands free while they're driving" (ABC, 2007). This again confirms that society perceives the use of a mobile phone as a risky distraction while driving.

Hospitals and petrol stations also warn against the use of mobiles for safety reasons. Participants in my research reveal however that these rules are often not taken seriously and are seen as flexible, as the following examples demonstrate.

I work at the hospital so ... I can actually keep it in, its called flight mode, and that cuts off all the telephone calls that come in, and go out, but it still allows me to use the rest of the features of the phone (Martin, 2006, i/v).

I guess you don't really want to kill anyone ... but I'm not too sure how they affect equipment. I've never, probably ever been in the circumstance where I've had to test that theory, yeah so, maybe it would probably make me think twice about it (Amy, 2006, i/v).

One doctor I spoke to said that he doesn't use a pager anymore, and that most doctors don't. Instead they use mobile phones, which are switched on in the hospital. He rarely turns his off.

In cinemas we are also asked to not use our mobile phones, however, individual understandings of what constitutes 'use' are different. For example one participant, when asked whether she would answer her mobile in the movies, responded with,

If it's someone that doesn't usually call me, and it's obviously urgent, then yes I would pick it up, or if they call me more than once. If I let it ring out, then I'll go outside and answer it. But I wouldn't answer it in the theatre, it pisses me off no end when people do that (Amy, 2006, i/v).

However another participant said, "If it was on silent yeah I would text and I'd receive a text yeah, 'cause it's on silent I have no problem with doing that" (Melinda, 2006, i/v). However, in opposition to this some individuals do not appreciate or tolerate *any* mobile phone use within a cinema. This is illustrated in Garry Maddox's article *Yeah, I'm at the movies*, "Alex fired back that he'd been interrupted by phone calls or texting three or four times during every recent movie and found the bright light from active mobiles as distracting in a darkened cinema as a ring or message beep" (2006, online).

This selection of formal rules and instances of interpersonal and social communication practices, reveal how, in the fluid exchange between social benefit and personal agency, we are negotiating within the discourse. The mobile phone has a powerful role to play in our multifaceted lives and it significantly affects our interpersonal relationships with the public and as citizens.

In addition to the more formally stated constraints on mobile phone use, there are many informal constraints that might broadly be considered as phone etiquette. My research has examined what these informal rules are. These include who can ring and when, and when to use the silent function of the phone.

One participant described she was 'frustrated' by the presence of her beeping (interrupting) mobile phone when she was in a public space,

I was at the RTA one day and one of my friends was sending a series of text messages and my message tone is really, really loud. And so I scrambled for the phone and put it straight on silent 'cause I didn't want to interrupt anyone else (Jillian, 2006, i/v).

Users are generally aware that it is possible if not likely that their mobile phone will interrupt them and others. When asked where she felt she shouldn't use the mobile phone, one participant answered, "At uni and at work, and when you're out at dinner and things like that, shouldn't use it, it's impolite" (Kathy, 2006, i/v).

Another participant said that she feels the need to put her phone on silent because there is a shared understanding that it is necessary for social courtesy. "If I was eating dinner I would put it on silent" (Melinda, 2006, i/v). However not all mobile phone users adhere to or agree with the etiquette. This was demonstrated recently in a Queensland café where, due to employees feeling that customers were being rude by speaking on their mobile phones whilst trying to make an order, there was a sign placed at the order counter that stated anyone using a mobile phone would not be served (Ford, 2007).

The use of the 'silent' or 'vibrate' mode for 'polite' reasons is commonly described in my research. For example one participant said, "I leave my messages on silent ... I kind of think ... it's polite" (Kathy, 2006, i/v). Likewise another stated, "If you're in some kind of intimate situation, like if you're having an in depth conversation or something ... I have it on silent because it doesn't sort of spoil the mood of what's going on" (Richard, 2006, i/v).

The conventions of family life can also shape the discourse of the mobile phone, as described by one participant who said,

At home the rule is you don't bring mobile phones to the table. You do not bring it to the kitchen table, and you don't bring it to the dining room table. That's just what my family has always done. They usually prefer it that we don't answer mobile phone calls during dinner, (Amy, 2006, i/v).

Likewise within my own family, I have been asked by my family that when I visit the family home that I refrain from using (mainly taking and making calls) my mobile phone (Research Observation Diary, April 2006).

Conversely, another participant who is a casual school teacher actually uses her mobile phone so as not to interrupt others in her home. She commented,

I've given some schools my home phone. But I try and let schools know to call me on my mobile instead, it was originally, just to not interrupt the other people in the house, with my mobile I can pick it up straight away, from my room, from wherever, but with the home phone it can wake everyone up if I get, cause I can get calls at 6.30 in the morning and everyone else gets up at 7.30am (Jillian, 2006, i/v).

There are social implications associated with these informal rules. For example my research shows that there is a perception (almost obligation) that you should be contactable all the

time: that when you appear to others to not be contactable it can create problems. For example one participant said,

If you haven't replied, like if my phone wasn't on me and I haven't replied for half a day, and then people are sort of like 'why aren't you replying?', or you miss out on opportunities because they've contacted you but you've missed out and you're too late so the movie has already started or something like that... I've had friends where... we were out one night and her phone was in the handbag and within the space of half an hour I think her boyfriend had started a fight with her because he thought she wasn't replying. The first message was something about 'I love you' and then there was a 'what are you doing', 'why aren't you replying' then a, 'oh you're probably out there scamming on other guys', 'oh you and all those slut friends you're with'. It just fully escalated... and she, like the first she got out, and it was the last message she'd read, and it was like this huge fight message (Richard, 2006, i/v).

The perception and expectation that we are always contactable also affects our working lives. One participant who is a relief teacher said,

I feel the need to be able to answer a phone call from school almost any time, because if I don't pick up they'll just call some else straight away and that can mean that I've missed out on a day's work. So now I'm a lot more tied to it, I'll get up in the morning and move my phone. I'll go to have a shower and I'll take my phone into the bathroom with me so that I'll hear it if it goes off

So you would answer it if you were showering in the morning?

Yep.

You wouldn't scan it?

No.

I'd just pick up straight away 'cause in the morning I know it's from the school, and I need to pick up straight away... I would turn off the shower and go and answer it (Jillian, 2006, i/v).

This and the following example illustrates that workplace discourses related to the boundaries between public and private communication and a range of management issues, also converge with mobile phone use. This is evident in the way one of my participants used her mobile phone on a Friday when she got home. She said she had 'the most horribly hideous day imaginable' that she had had a run in with her supervisor. When she got home her boss called her to say, "Today you've caused serious damage to someone's work at the lab". She then used her mobile phone to call her mum to say "I think I just lost my job". But then she decided to SMS her boss to try to sort things out. She said,

I probably would have been a lot more worried for the whole weekend if I hadn't had the chance to SMS [her boss], cause I don't feel it's appropriate to call my boss, but to SMS him is a different question... I don't feel that it's as intrusive (Amy, 2006, i/v).

Also demonstrated in this example is the idea that our perceptions, obligations and expectations of our own and others' uses of the mobile phone changes, depending on which function of the technology we are using. The rules of practice change depending on whether we are texting or calling and what relationship we have with the person we are contacting. As Raymond Williams commented about television,

Original intention corresponds with the known or desired practices of a particular social group, and the pace and scale of development will be radically affected by that group's specific intentions and its relative strength. Yet at many subsequent stages other social groups, sometimes with other intentions or at least scales of priority, will adopt and develop the technology, often with different purposes and effects (1990, p.129).

Mobile phones, as these few examples demonstrate, are powerful cultural objects that affect our relationships at home, with the public and peers, as citizens, and in the workplace. As Jim McGuigan states in 'Towards a Sociology of the Mobile Phone', "Mobile communications have discursive properties linked to social behaviour in different contexts. The very design and representation of the object itself and its diverse social uses are meaningful" (McGuigan, 2005, p. 50). The interviews I have conducted to date offer rich insights into how these fluid and flexible negotiations, within the emerging and dynamic discourse of mobile phone use, link with the surrounding discourses of work, technology, entertainment, friendship and community.

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