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PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC PLACES

Face and Mobile Video

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ABSTRACT

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Personal technology in public places: Face and mobile video

Personal consumer technologies such as personal stereos and mobile telephones typically disturb the social situations in which they are used. In this article, we use Goffman's concept of "face" to study how people manage streaming video to mobile phones in public places. We describe three management strategies. First, users avert disturbance by avoiding the irritation of others. Second, users negotiate appropriate behavior by adjusting to signaled disapproval. Third, users may combine the previous strategies in a deliberate, aggressive effort to invite attention and create "thrills". By studying streaming mobile video in public places, we provide elements for understanding the social psychology of future, multimedia rich mobile telephony.

Key words

Personal technology, mobile telephony, mobile streaming video, face, interaction, disturbance

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1 INTRODUCTION

As mobile telephones are carried around at all times, they are used in a great number of places. Computers and the Internet, in contrast, are typically used in places specifically organized for interacting with a computer. This simple observation has several consequences. In particular, mobile technology raises complex interaction-related problems that its users have to solve somehow in order to use the technology smoothly.

The phenomenon of coping with various kinds of involvement is referred to as “managing face” by Goffman (1967). The management of face constrains the use of mobile technology in public places, but its effect is not straightforward. In this article, we explore the watching of streaming mobile video in non-institutional settings to observe patterns of managing face. Mobile multimedia technology – mobile phones and PDAs capable of capturing, sending and receiving audio, photographs, video and increasingly, television broadcasts – is currently revolutionizing everyday life. In 2004, Nokia rather than Canon or Sony was the largest digital camera manufacturer in the world by a factor of ten. This article focuses on how people use and manage personal mobile technology in public places.

2 PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC PLACES

The first studies of mobile telephones showed that mobile telephony in general is a “disturbing” technology and that people use several successful techniques to manage these disturbances, which was in line with results from studies of preceding personal technologies such as portable radios and stereos. As du Gay notes with his colleagues, in many of the popular articles that appeared shortly after the [Sony] Walkman was launched criticized [the Walkman] for its anti-social, atomizing effects. This strand of critique centered on the fact that the Walkman allowed individuals to switch off from the world as and when they liked and that this was likely to make them more introverted, self-serving and less tolerant of other people and of “society” more generally. (du Gay et al. 1997, p. 89, also 91-92, 112-118).

Later criticism paid attention to the fact that although the Walkman sets people apart from each other, it also connects them to other aspects of metropolitan life such as music and fashion (Chambers 1990, p. 2, quoted in du Gay et al. 1997, p. 94). With the Walkman, people “poeticize” and re-appropriate their environment (Hosokawa 1984, p. 176). For instance, familiar scenes and sights attain new aesthetic qualities when they are experienced with music of the user’s choice (Bull 2000, p. 85-96). Still, both arguments point out that personal stereos change the way in which people behave in public, making them less attentive to what is going on around them, and also less available for interaction.

The most comprehensively attended personal technology in terms of its impact on behavior in public places is mobile telephony, which began raising public concern a decade after the Walkman. The first evidence was indirect. It was noted in the earliest analyses of mobile phones how people create an etiquette of use for them (see Kopomaa 2000, p. 87–101). For instance, the sociologist Timo Kopomaa mentions *The Book on Etiquette for Mobile Phones*, which was apparently published in the mid-nineties in Finland, which was a forerunner in the adoption of mobile telephony. Later studies describe numerous rules concerning the use of mobile phones. These rules specify places, times and situations in which mobile phones can and cannot be used. Phones have been forbidden in concert halls, schools, meetings and many other settings (for institutional settings, see Katz 2005; Ling 2002, p. 293-296; Ling 2004, p. 125-140). In many others – such as restaurants – their use is discouraged (Ling 2004, p. 127). Surveys and experimental studies of non-institutional settings also confirm the notion that interaction with a mobile phone prompts annoyance (Wei and Leung 1999; Monk et al. 2004; Monk, Fellas and Ley 2004).

People manage such tension in various ways. Again, the best evidence is from studies of mobile phones. In an ethnographic study, Morel (2002) analyzed how people “deplace” themselves in public places while talking into their mobile phones. When a call is received, the call-taker typically distances himself from his previous company, and starts to wander around in search of a niche (for example, provided by street benches and ATM machines) that enables him to talk without disturbing the situation. People also negotiate a niche through apologies before taking a call. To some extent, the problem can be addressed through technical solutions; for instance, by turning off or silencing the phone when one is not available and relying on vibration instead of the ring tone. More typically, users simply speak quietly and apologize before walking away from their previous engagement.

Such practices are particularly important if mobile activities spread to the environment. For instance, people routinely take notes, write down phone numbers, check calendars, and discuss memos while talking (O’Hara et al. 2001, p. 190-191). Other related activities include sharing content. In a paper concerning dating chat in Paris, Relieu (2002) shows

how young men swap phones when attempting to find out whether or not a date notice is from a real person (cf. Kasesniemi 2003; Weilenmann and Larsson 2002).

The tensions between situational demands and the decontextualizing effects of the mobile phone have been analyzed by Licoppe and his colleagues from a perspective stemming from Goffman's sociology (Licoppe and Heurtin 2001, p. 2002; Licoppe 2003; also Ling 2004, p. 132-133). First, even callers' contexts may be upset by making a call. Second, the call may infringe on the personal space of the call-taker. Licoppe also shows how call-takers' try to imagine the recipient's schedules and location when making a call. These social psychological constructs guide use just as etiquette does.

3 FACE AND MOBILE PERSONAL TECHNOLOGY

Taking the cue from Licoppe's work, we build on Erving Goffman's work to understand how mobile multimedia functions in interaction. How this takes place can best be studied in terms of Goffman's notion of "face." According to Goffman, people maintain a line of activity that maintains their self-image in an internally consistent way which is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants (Goffman 1967, p. 6). Face is ritually important and more than convenience is at stake: ultimately, it is the participants' trust in that they can go about in their lives in an orderly manner that may be threatened (see Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1994, II, p. 220-222).

Following Goffman and Rawls (1989), we understand face as cooperative process in which several people are involved rather than as a psychological construct. Face-work consists first of avoiding contacts that are likely to threaten the person's face. When someone's face is threatened, a four-step interchange is performed to re-establish its sanctity. Initially, participants signal misconduct. Then the offender is given a chance to correct the offense and re-establish the expressive order by compensating for his actions or by showing that the threat was meaningless or unintentional. The third move is typically acceptance, followed by the offender's "gratitude for those who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness" (Goffman 1967, p. 22). At this stage, face is saved, and action returns to its normal path.

People can also exploit face-saving actions. For instance, one may fish for compliments by being overly modest. Another may challenge the bystanders' face to make them flounder. A third can arrange for the others to hurt his feelings and thus to force them to feel guilt (Goffman 1967, p. 24). In a contest, the winner establishes a favorable image of himself and shows skill in managing himself.

Bystanders align themselves in various ways around the interaction contours used in face-work. Example 1 (fig. 1) is from a study described in detail in the Data and Methods section. In the example, two ladies on the subway were watching and singing karaoke songs streamed to their mobile phones. At first, they were the only ratified participants. However, soon two pre-teen boys got interested in what the ladies were doing and joined the singers to marvel at the novelty. A middle-aged woman's depreciative facial expressions and her body language indicated that karaoke singing was not appropriate in a public vehicle. Finally, a teenager sitting in the same compartment with the singers shielded himself from them with a newspaper, making it clear to outsiders that he was not a part of the group.



FIGURE 1. Singing karaoke on the subway.

This example is well in line with the first existing evidence on how mobile multimedia functions in interaction. Multimedia on mobile phones may be even more intrusive than the conventional use of personal stereos or mobile phones. First, replaying multimedia generates noise. Second, creating multimedia is a disruptive activity. People even pose for the device (see Koskinen et al. 2002). Third, people routinely share content with mobile phones (Kasesniemi 2003; Weilenmann and Larsson 2001), but this practice is apparently more common with multimedia (see Koskinen et al. 2002; Scifo 2005). In sum, mobile multimedia reorganizes the interactional domain significantly. There is an evident need to know how this takes place and what techniques people use to manage the implications of these activities.

4 DATA AND METHODS: FIELD TRIAL ON MOBILE STREAMING VIDEO

We carried out a field trial on streaming video to mobile phones in the Helsinki metropolitan area in Finland at the end of 2002. Mobile phones suitable for viewing videos were given to persons of various ages, gender and backgrounds. They were encouraged to watch videos in various different situations and asked to report their experiences in a diary. Technically, the trial was carried out with Nokia 7650 phones running the Symbian operating system, RealOne Player and video streaming over a GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) connection at 22 kbps. The videos were streamed at 15 frames per second with a resolution of 172*100 pixels. The file size of a 4 minute video was 750 Kb. (More details in Repo et al. 2003, 2006).

In video streaming, the phone simply shows that part of the video currently being transmitted. This means that the length of the streamed video can, in principle, be infinite. On the other hand, streamed videos cannot be saved, nor can they be forwarded.

Users were asked to watch the videos available at Elisa.TV, a mobile portal for streaming videos (wap.elisa.net/elisatv). The supply comprised 46 readymade videos in which entertainment and karaoke accounted for the majority. The trial setting was not set up for the purpose of our study. Nine users filled the diary for a week, starting from Monday. In the diaries, people described their activities with the phone daily, including details of the physical and social contexts of use. At the end, they reflected on their overall experiences with the device. On average, the users were 25.1 years old. There were six women and three men with, on average, secondary degree education and little experience of multimedia phones. During the week, 115 use-episodes were described in the diaries, i.e., roughly 2 episodes a day.

The diary method has its strengths and pitfalls (see De Longis et al. 1992). A diary produces data from places where researchers might not obtain access (cf. Ito 2005) and it provides an insight into the users' interpretations, especially if the diary uses open-ended questions, as in this study. However, people are generally unreliable observers of some aspects of their own behavior. In particular, they may find it difficult to observe other people and interaction. Also, they get tired of the diary: four diary-keepers got increasingly imprecise as the week progressed. However, since we were interested in descriptions of specific episodes of use rather than the development of usage, this does not threaten the quality of our data significantly. The data is translated from Finnish and Swedish, and the participants are kept anonymous. Our analysis is qualitative and aimed at advancing understanding by giving a "thick" description of how mobile video is used; a quantitative analysis of the same data is published elsewhere (Koskinen & Repo 2005).

5 ANALYSIS

We next describe three interaction processes through which people negotiate a right to use personal technologies in public. They illustrate the main finding of the study: mobile video prompts very little harm in public. The main reason for this observation lies in the way in which people use their devices. In practically all aspects of use, users take bystanders into account by making sure that they use their devices in ways that do not prompt unfriendly signals from bystanders. They also keep a watchful eye on such signals and tune down their behavior if they note having caused disturbances. However, as the final case shows, modest behavior cannot always be expected. Especially teenagers may use their devices purposefully to get attention and cause stir in public.

5.1 Avoidance in face management

Users know that watching video from a mobile phone is a noisy affair in public places, and as such, it may be disturbing for bystanders. Users also know that such disturbances may have several social implications. In essence, they know that bystanders may call attention to the activity, and demand an apology, or take other action aimed at bringing the user back in line. Such actions may threaten the face of the user. The first tactic to manage problems of this kind is to avoid places, people, and activities that may lead to friction-prone situations (Goffman 1967, p. 15-17).

Example 2 describes avoidance in action. The user describes how she watched videos in several settings without any bystander reaction. Several things in this description tell about avoidance as a way of managing possible problems in interaction. In particular, notice how she reports how she “quickly tried” to watch “something” in the train, and watched the video at the tram stop so quietly that even she did not hear anything. (Darude was a dance music performer popular in Europe in 2002.)

Example 2. (from diary #9 Tue) (emphasis added by authors)

In the morning train to Helsinki, people usually rest or read papers. Usually, people avoid being noisy. Occasional ringing phones feel like major disturbances in such a calm atmosphere. Even so, I took my phone and turned it on. I was a bit afraid about what kind of sound it would keep. Quickly, I tried to watch something, **but no one reacted to it**. People are sleepy in the morning. At a tram stop, I again watched something – **no one reacted**, and I didn’t hear anything. It was so cold. In the tram, I tried to watch Darude, but did not get a connection. **No one was interested** – not even a young man on the other side...

Several issues explain the minimal reactions reported here. These issues fall in three categories. First, users kept their activity inconspicuous to be considerate and polite: “I feel like watching videos in a restaurant – especially in a good one – would be impolite. You should pay attention to other people, just like with a mobile phone” (#9 Thu).

Second, users keep their action toned down because they imagine that a more aggressive approach would disturb bystanders. Restaurants, for instance, are designed to offer a pleasant experience. Any activity that takes people away from this mood is deemed impolite, and ruled out. When asked in what kind of situation it was unpleasant to watch videos, several participants replied public transportation: “What if there is a human being next to me who is tired of work and harassed by his boss and gets distressed because of that scratchy voice: no, thank you!” (#6 Wed). Such imaginary constructs classify certain public places and situations as unsuitable for watching mobile videos.

Third, self-respect entered the picture (Goffman 1967, p. 10-12). The users inferred that bystanders would label them negatively if they behaved improperly. Such self-restraints effectively discourage certain behaviors. For instance, it is not nice to think of oneself as “a stupid show-off”: “I wouldn’t use the video in a bus, for example, because is it difficult to make the sound non-disturbing. Outsiders would surely think that I’m a stupid show-off” (#1 Wed). One may lose self-respect in one’s very own eyes.

Notice that these reasons are constructs of imagination, but lead to consequential behaviors that shape social intercourse tactfully but significantly. People set limits to their own behavior when they think how others would experience their behavior. One’s own reactions become a useful diagnostic for learning what is proper and what is not. In G.H. Mead’s words, “it is that social control, as operating in terms of self-criticism [that] exerts itself ... over individual behavior of conduct, serving to integrate the individual and his actions with reference to the organized social process of experience and behavior in which he is implicated” (Mead 1962: 255). Of course, people also transform these imagined constructs by relating them to their environment before making judgments. A noisy device may even go unnoticed in a noisy place. Thus, one participant tells how she went to a local McDonald’s and turned on the video. “[T]here was no reaction to it ... perhaps there was too much noise and sound anyway.” (Diary note, #9 Thu). Similarly, when adults used the device with children, their activity remained largely unnoticed. Entertaining children provides an excuse for being engaged in uncommon activities; bystanders withstand a small disturbance if it prevents a more extensive one. Nevertheless, social imagination is evident in these situation specific transformations.

The significance of these acts of imagination is in that as long as such an internal role-taking process is going on, watching mobile video changes very few things in public. Watching videos with a mobile phone is then just one more harmless, barely noticeable element in the picture. As a result, the most common experience in our study was “civil inattention.” A failure to extend civil inattention to others is not negatively sanctioned in a direct and open fashion (Goffman 1963, p. 87). Inattention is a key element in the smooth accomplishment of everyday life. Even so, there is an important social process going on. When users think that bystanders could respond to their actions in a face-threatening fashion, they might avoid challenging the perpetrator to avoid any risks. In consequence, others are not bothered, and normal order is maintained. People can go about doing whatever it is they have been doing.

5.2 Negotiating order: the reparative process

In a few cases, bystanders got bothered and signaled it to the user. When taking action, bystanders assume that the perpetrator understands having caused problems for others, and adjusts behavior to others’ expectations with respect to the situation. If users did that, order was restored, and the episode was over. Following Goffman (1963, 85-86), Ling identifies nonobservance as looking away from others during a call, and as concerned looks that show others of concurrent phone engagement and situational awareness (Ling 2004, p. 133-134).

Thus, one user related: “I was watching videos in a tram. It felt fine, but other passengers looked upset when they noticed me” (#2 Wed). More specifically, video sound was a source of problems. Keeping the sound level low made it possible to view the videos uninterrupted: “...the sound bothered other people... I had problems with the device’s speaker” (#4 Tue). Example 3 is from a gym. A young woman reports how she had watched videos while exercising, and reported “weird looks” on bystanders’ faces.

Example 3. From diary #8 Sat. (emphasis added by authors)

Today I watched the three music videos available in the phone once again. This time the place was the gym. It's boring to work out with the stepper if there's nothing on TV. Even though the quality of the videos in the mobile is not the best, I was able to work out longer than usually. **On the other hand, others who were exercising looked at me in a weird fashion.**

As these examples suggest, bystander reactions are typically minimal. Bystanders do just enough to attract the attention of the user, but not more. An angry but quick glance, or a "weird," perplexed look was used to achieve that end. Such response has its benefits. A quick glance is essentially ambiguous in intent but it signals to the user that his actions are being followed. The user recognizes the signal but cannot unequivocally say that the glance was aimed to sanction him and thus be offended by the action. For bystanders, the strategy is safe because it transmits the signal, but does not give the perpetrator a reason to be offended. It maintains bystanders' face; making an aggressive remark might threaten their face, and require an apology from them rather than from the initial perpetrator.

Watching videos seldom initiated face-to-face interactions. However, it did happen occasionally. In Example 1 reported earlier in this article, there was an instance in which a middle-aged woman was offended by two women who sang karaoke on the subway, and let them know that by her conspicuous and hard-not-to-notice facial expressions. Of course, such crossplays (Goffman 1981) were not necessarily disapproving in tone. In one instance, a middle-aged woman listened to a schlager in rush-hour train to suburban Helsinki. Two other women joined her to discuss the device and the videos.

Again, we find a few disturbances in ongoing action. The sequential understanding of face and the four-step reparative process described by Goffman is evident (1967, p. 19-23; see also Rawls 1989). However, in watching mobile videos, the process is typically truncated. People typically skip the last two steps: they are assimilated into the second turn, which is accomplished by turning down the volume of the device or by muting it. Although the process behind this contour is different than in the avoidance-based contour, the result is quite similar. When bystanders signal the users that they are being disturbed, users' next actions orient to real actions in addition to those products of imagination typical to the first contour described.

5.3 Mobile video as a vehicle for aggressive face-work

The third face management strategy is a transformation of the previous ones, and presents a possible deviant case. Mobile video is used as a tool for aggressive face-work, and willfully presents a threat "for what can be safely gained by it," as Goffman notes (1967, p. 24). Thus, users may exploit the fact that bystanders are being provoked. As long as bystanders resort only to avoidance and disapproving glances as means of social control, there is only a small risk in being overly provocative. If bystanders voice their disapproval, the users knows that the provocation has been successful. A good example is provided by "ghetto blasters" and powerful radios played out loud to claim turf in poor areas in cities (Anderson 1992, p. 174-175).

Though less colorful than a turf battle in an urban slum, one reason for such action is thrill. In Example 4, participants experience a drift (Goffman 1963, p. 174): they are carried further and further into the encounter up to a point in which they rule the situational reality on the basis of their own concerns. Their action is disturbing, but they do not care. On the contrary, they are thrilled because bystanders are bewildered and

show their disapproval. It is the sense of thrill that makes aggressive face-work a memorable experience.

Example 4. From diary #8 Wed. (emphasis added by authors)

We watched karaoke today in the school cafeteria. It was fun, all of us at the table singing together. The other diners looked at us with an expression of “good grief!” **on their faces – but we didn’t let that bother us.**

The following account gives us another cue of what people are seeking by aggressive face-work. Here, a user reported how “there were lots of other people at the bus stop where I watched [the music videos], but nobody paid any attention to the phone and to what I was doing. It disappointed me greatly because I had hoped that people would watch my phone with envy” (#8 Mon). If someone becomes envious of something, the perpetrator learns that she is in a better position than they are, which boosts self-respect. However, evidence is needed to make sure that others are envious. To gather that evidence, one has to pose conspicuously to create the necessary confusion.

In theoretical terms, it is reasonable to see this contour in terms of face-management rather than as a deviant case that would require new theoretical concepts. The notion lies already in Goffman, who notes that people who resort to aggressive face-work simultaneously make sure that they can “safely” gain something with their activity (see Goffman 1967, p. 24). In practical terms, they construe a safe way out from their action. For instance, in Example 4, there are several such pre-emptive measures at work. First, the scene took place in a school cafeteria, which is a less serious context than, say, the classroom, where there is a risk of institutional attention. Second, there is safety in numbers (see Asch 1955 and Haney et al. 1973). It is difficult to pin down one person as responsible for the scene. Even though bystanders may not approve certain behaviors, they also have to sanction a group, which is riskier than targeting an individual. Third, the singers were teenagers: bystanders apply different rules to them than to adults. Among teenagers in particular, the rules of middle-class society are routinely broken to show nerve and to gain respect among peers (see Anderson 1999, p. 73). Incidences like these provide material for stories that create reputations and are fun to share later. Such gains may justify a snap on fingers by bystanders; it might even make the story better by providing evidence of success in the group’s attempt to cause stir.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

“Face” refers to people carrying out a line of activity that maintains their self-image in an internally consistent way that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by others. The concept originates from the late sociologist Erving Goffman (1967), whose seminal analysis of the phenomenon focused not just on the importance of face, but also on how people manage face. This article has analyzed watching videos in public places on a mobile phone in terms of face. Watching videos has provided us with a useful case for analyzing how people use personal technologies in public places. The importance of this analysis lies in technological development: if mobile multimedia becomes more common in near future, public places may transform significantly from what they are now. They change from places in which people fit their courses of action to other people to places in which people balance between the media environment and the “real,” living environment.

Our analysis represents an initial attempt to study how people manage the possible tensions between these two realms. Specifically, we have focused on the tension between mobile video-watching and the surrounding social context. With video streaming technology, people can watch wherever they are music videos, TV programs, and even karaoke songs from their mobiles. Watching videos is noisy without headsets and can sometimes be mesmerizing enough to get users deeply involved with the content, ignoring normally adhered-to situational constraints. There are two predecesing analogies to ignoring situational constraints due to the personal use of media. The Sony Walkman initially and personal stereos later caused public worries about public places becoming more “atomistic” in nature, prompting sometimes aggressive behaviors towards the users (cf. du Gay et al. 1997; Bull 2000). Second, there is evidence from mobile phones. People who talk to mobile phones in public places irritate others, who have to listen to others’ businesses and intimate matters (see Kopomaa 2000, p. 87–101; Katz 2005; Ling 2002, p. 293–296; Monk et al. 2004; Monk, Fellas and Ley 2004). Studies on both themes point out that users take into account what bystanders do and how they are believed to feel. Users manage situations by adjusting their behavior either by imagining others’ responses or by taking the cue from subtle signals.

Our study can be considered as an attempt to interpret our basic observation: contrary to our expectations, watching mobile video in public places did not cause noteworthy stirring. We have described three interaction-related contours for how people succeeded in to managing tension between the media environment and the real environment. First, there is a minimal contour based on avoidance. Users’ keep their activity barely noticeable, and keep it well in line with the requirements of their surroundings. Second, there is the reparative process truncated from the one described by Goffman (1967). When the user realizes that his activity disturbs others, he tones down the device and activities around it, thus restoring order. Third, the device could be used as a vehicle for aggressive face-work. People resort to aggressive face-work to cause disturbance deliberately for various purposes, ranging from thrill to attempts to make bystanders envious. If successful, these disturbances provide for a memorable and reportable event. A closer look at these contours also shows opposite tendencies built into them. For instance, when people purposefully violate bystanders’ right to go about in their business unharmed, their action also shows acute awareness of the risks involved. They install several safety procedures to their action, ranging from finding a proper niche (Morel 2002) for their activity to working as a team to get support, if needed (cf. Goffman 1967, p. 24).

In terms of earlier literature on personal technologies, this article has several implications. A prominent theme in the literature on personal stereos and mobile phones

has been the way in which these technologies take people “away” from concurrent action. For instance mobile phones transfer people from their “physical surroundings into a more virtual world of a telephone conversation” (Ling 2004, p. 135), and back (Ling 2004, p. 138-140). The Walkman, on the other hand, “breaks the sanctity of the place” by making it possible for people to listen to music of their choice regardless of place, thus partially detaching them from the concerns of the surroundings (see du Gay et al. 1997: 106). Mobile multimedia faces both challenges.

Several rules of etiquette have been developed to manage situational disruptions, and sometimes they are institutionalized (see Katz 2005; Licoppe and Heurtin 2002). Previous attempts to explain why people are annoyed when they have to overhear mobile phone conversations have focused on the fact that hearing only one side of a conversation is more annoying than overhearing the whole conversation (Monk, Fellas and Ley 2004).

The problem with this analysis is that it only applies to mobile phone conversations and emphasizes the static character of situational constraints. The concept of “face” provides a way to rephrase the issue in more encompassing interactional terms, which has a number of benefits. First, instead of seeing the user of a mobile device as being torn between two separate worlds, the co-located and the distant, we argue that it is better to study the tension in terms of how the user tries to balance between these two worlds. Second, by looking at this tension in terms of face-work, we may see how the use of new technologies such as mobile streaming video is managed in public places, when no institutional rules are yet predominant. Third, this understanding is more general by nature than the one proposed by Monk with his colleagues (Monk et al. 2004; Monk, Fellas and Ley 2004). Their claim that hearing only one side of a conversation is the main reason for annoyance may hold for mobile phones, but cannot be applied to technologies such as portable games and stereos, which are not based on talk, but still annoy bystanders (cf. du Gay et al. 1997: 112-118).

In conclusion, understanding personal mobile technologies in terms of face-work not only provides us with a sense of the social aspects of mobile devices, but more importantly, it helps us to grasp the practical grounds of users’ opinions and attitudes. It provides a step towards a social psychology of how multimedia functions in mobile telephony. This knowledge is increasingly called for as mobile telephony evolves in the direction of multimedia.

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Notes 1. We use Goffman’s terminology (ratified participants, subordinate communication, byplay, crossplay, etc.) from his analysis of “participation framework.” Goffman attempted to break the notions of “speaker” and “hearer” with these, more accurate notions (Goffman 1981).

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