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Unlimited or disrupted communication? How does the development of the mobile phone effect our ability of social action?

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Abstract:

The aim of this essay is to discuss the thesis of the German Sociologist Günter Burkhardt that in modern societies a phenomenon appeared which he calls “handymanía”, an excessive and nearly addictive use of the mobile phones especially from adolescents. After a short overview about the history of the cell phone, I will relate this development to Jürgen Habermas “theory of communicative action”, more precisely to his diagnosis of a pathological society (“lifeworld”) to find out if the “handymanía” could be one expression of it. Adjacent I will present social-psychological theories from E.H.Erikson and Tilmann Habermas to ascertain whether juveniles could really be a high-risk group for this kind of addiction. I will focus on the ability to communicate in an Habermasian way that could be seriously harmed by the unregulated usage of cell phones.

Keywords: telecommunication, cell phones, youth behaviour, Habermas

“Habermas’s approach implies that in its proper sphere technology is neutral, but outside that sphere it causes the various social pathologies that are the chief problems of modern society” (Feenberg, 1996, 47)¹.

I. Introduction

The German Sociologist Günter Burkart published a book in 2007 in which he diagnosed the “handyman²”, as a social phenomenon in our modern society. Symptomatically it is characterized by the permanent need to be engaged with the mobile phone. According to Burkart this covers a **sub**ject difficulty: the fear of not being busy. To emphasize the pathological pattern behind it he made a research with some students: for three days they had to live without their mobile phones. Even though they knew that they would get them back they started to get withdrawal syndromes after a quite short time. What sounds at the first sight like a conversant and not really alarming observance could allude to a less obvious, but more serious problem.

What kind of impact has the technological development on an individual as being a *zoon echon logon*³, what is the effect that it has on our ability of social interaction? I will try to discuss this question by recurring mainly to Jürgen Habermas’ definition of communicative action as being the basis for a prudential and well-oiled democratic society. Moreover, I will examine his antagonistic concept of “lifeworld” as the

¹ Citation from Corbin, Michelle: *Technology in the Garden of good and evil: or Marcuse, Habermas and Haraway Walk into a Bar* (2004), page 18

² Günter Burkart: *Handymania. Wie das Mobiltelefon unser Leben verändert hat*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt a.M., 2007

³ This terms goes back to Aristotle, and means that we, as humans distinguish ourselves from animals through our ability to nominate things and to reach *gnosis* through that (M-S.L)

social sphere and the “system” of economy and technology. Building on that, I will try to make a connection to social psychological theories of Adolescence to show how this especially effects the development of the social skills and the juvenescent process of identity shaping. After this theoretical sub-base I will adduce several studies, which substantiate my thesis.

More clearly, this work tries to show, that mobiles, even though they are part of the technical sphere, start to get a emotionally co notated role with the user. This could probably culminated into a social confusion that is particularly dangerous in the young age.

II. The effects of the development of the mobile phone on the ability of adolescence social interaction

Recurring to the three main points that Burkhart identifies Modernity with -Mobility, Individuality and Communication- it is not illegitimate to say that the cell-phone embodies nowadays the society of the Western Industrial Nations.⁴ In the following I will explain in which perspective these terms will be considered here.

1. The *triumphal procession* of the mobile phone

It seems to be necessary to give a short overview, how fast the mobile phone conquest the world. In 1947 Bell Labs, the research organization of Alcatel-Lucent and previously of the American Telephone & Telegraph Company, was the first that developed a network of small overlapping cell sites supported by a call switching infrastructure that tracks users

⁴ Comp. Burkhart, Guenter: Das Mobiltelefon und die Veränderung der Kommunikation im sozialen Raum, S. 13, from: Ulrich Beck (Hrsg.): Soziale Welt. *Zeitschrift für sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung und Praxis*. 51. Jg., Heft 2. Baden-Baden 2000. S. 209-227.

as they moved through a network and pass their call from one site to another, while holding the connection. It also installed the first commercial cellular network in Chicago in the 1970s.⁵

By November 2007, the total number of mobile phone subscriptions in the world had reached 3.3 billion, which also makes mobile phone the most widely spread technology and the most customary electronic attachment in the world.⁶ Technology experts predict that by 2020 mobile wireless communications are very likely to be available to anyone, anywhere on the globe for extremely low cost.⁷ While at the beginning of the 1980s it was mostly an instrument of the “Yuppies”, the businessmen and bankers, rapidly it became more and more affordable for private users.

2. Reflective Communication as the base of democracy

It is certain that through the development of the Mobile Communication Market there has been a change of the meaning of communication as such. Nowadays it is not necessarily connected with looking into the face of another person anymore. But how does this obvious difference in the “communicative setting” effect the “communicative quality”? To answer that issue it is first necessary to define the term of *communication* as such. Hence I will recur to Jürgen Habermas and his “Theory of Communicative Action” (TCA).

⁵ From http://www.alcatel-lucent.com/wps/portal/!ut/p/kcxml/04_Sj9SPykssy0xPLMnMz0vM0Y_QjzKLd4w3MXMBSYG_YRq6m-pEoYgbxjggRX4_83FT9IH1v_QD9gtzQiHJHR0UAaOmbyQ!!/delta/bas e64xml/L3dJdyEvd0ZNQUFzQUMvNElVRS82X0FfNDZL, last access: 20.01.2009, 13:36

⁶ From <http://www.reuters.com/article/technologyNews/idUSL2917209520071129>, last access 20.01.2009, 13:30

⁷ OECD: Mobile Commerce, *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 124, 2007, p.6

“... the lifeworld remains largely unthematized, but the theorist can differentiate its resources into three broad components: the stock of taken-for-granted certitudes and ideas (‘culture’); the norms, loyalties, institutions, and so forth, that secure group cohesion or solidarity (‘society’); and the competencies and skills that members have internalised (‘personality’). A viable lifeworld is reproduced, then, through the cultural transmission of ideas through forms of social integration, and through the socialization of its members.”⁸

To understand the whole concept, it is important to recall Habermas’ view of the modernity as such. Besides he reverts to Weber’s idea of the rationalized society and Marx’ picture of the self-alienated proletarian. Through the industrialisation two different spheres emerged. On one side the *system* of labour and technology in which the actors behave strategically with the aim to gain as much power and money as possible. On the other side, the *lifeworld*, as being the sphere of social relations where consensus-orientated communicative acting should rule. Referring to that, Habermas observes the “colonization of the *lifeworld*“ since strategic acting started to replace communicative acting. One effect of this pathological development is that individuals and groups increasingly identify themselves and their aspirations in systematic terms. In a social psychological interpretation we could also say that the invention of the new Medias (internet, mobile phones, etc.), since they are not only part of the *system sphere* anymore, could have lead to the deprivation of our competence of self-reflective acting for a materialistic cost-benefit-ratio. In the following I would like to provide some examples that can clarify the meaning of this more abstract concept.

⁸ Juergen Habermas: *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, p. 518

3. A Change of Paradigm: The Mobile Phone “colonizes” the lifeworld

A recent report of the *OECD Digital Economy Papers* proofed that nowadays most mobile users are individuals. In Japan 85.9% of mobile holders are private persons and in some European countries the rate is even higher. In France, for example, 91.7% of all mobile holders use their mobile only for private purposes (only 3% use them only for business purposes). The even more striking phenomenon is the daily use of such devices by children and young adults.

In a Norwegian survey, 80% of 8-24 year-olds answered that they had used a mobile phone on the previous day. In Korea, more than 60% of those under age 19 have a mobile phone. In Canada, 23% of students report having their own mobile phone. In Japan, 11.8% of the ten and eleven years old students and 35.9% between 13 and 14 years have their own cell phone.⁹

The following researches show that this could result in an alarming problem. The usage of mobile phones was positively associated with health compromising behaviours like smoking and consuming alcohol in a survey with a representative sample of 14–16-year-olds Finns in 2001. Mobile phone was used by 89% of respondents and by 13% for at least one hour per day. (compare Table 1).

An Austrian survey reveals further concerns: 73% of parents with a child or children in school consider that their children’s use of mobile phones presents the greatest danger of insolvency, far more than a car (54%) or the Internet (43%).

Also, according to a 2004 survey by Mobilkom Austria, 59% of children aged from ten to fourteen do not know the difference between toll-free

⁹ Ibid: p.6-7

numbers and premium call numbers; 79% do not recognise the risks of SMS advertisements, which can lead to high mobile phone charges.¹⁰ It seems that Adolescence are in a special way fascinated by the new invention, but also that they are not really able to control its usage. But how does that observance correspond with common theories of adolescence behaviour in general?

¹⁰ OECD, 2007, *ibid.*, p. 9

Study variable		Boys	Girls
Intensity of mobile phone use			
Not at all		15	7
Occasionally		43	34
Daily <1 h		33	43
Daily 1–3 h		7	12
Daily ≥4 h		2	4
Total	%	100	100
<i>n</i>		2008	2479
Smoking status			
At most once		52	46
Not daily		28	32
Daily <10 times		9	12
Daily ≥10 times		11	10
Total	%	100	100
<i>n</i>		2008	2498
Use of smokeless tobacco			
Never tried		73	90
Used once		11	7
Used more		16	3
Total	%	100	100
<i>n</i>		2079	2566
Alcohol drinking style			
Abstinence		32	24
Occasional drinking		29	31
Recurring drinking		23	29
Recurring drunkenness		16	16
Total	%	100	100
<i>n</i>		2045	2530
Weekly spending money			
Lowest quartile		33	38
Two middlemost quartiles		45	43
Highest quartile		22	19
Total	%	100	100
<i>n</i>		1990	2458

Table 1: Percentage distributions of the study variables by sex ¹¹

¹¹ Source: Koivusilta L.; Lintonen T.; Rimpelä A. (2005): “Intensity of mobile phone use and health compromising behaviours—how is information and communication technology connected to health-related lifestyle in adolescence?”, *Journal of Adolescence*, Volume 28, Issue 1, February, Pages 35-47

4. The Adolescence Process of Individualisation

The American Psychologist E.H.Erikson constructed a model of the adolescence development, which mainly focuses on the process of Individualisation. He emphasizes the necessity of polarisation for the emergence of an own individual perspective of the world. There should be an interplay between identification and dissociation from the society. But exactly this natural tendency to extremism makes them especially vulnerable and influenceable because they tend to adopt offers of identification without questioning them:

“In general it is primarily the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds.”¹²

The cliques, in sociological terms the peer groups, mostly have internal habitus (P.Bourdieu, 1984) to distinguish themselves from other groups. This means that they create special dress-codes, haircuts and ways of speaking, which the members of the group have to follow. These behaviour patterns can be explicitly shown through a common appearance or, on a more unconscious level, in the way of estimating the environmental impressions. The peer group is also the place, where teenagers have a coeval forum to exchange opinions and experiences. Talking about the world and reflecting on our position in it, shapes a coherent image of ourselves in comparison to the others. Therefore, it is obvious how important a functioning network of communication is on the way of becoming an adult.

¹² E. H. Erikson: *Identity and the life circle*, by International Universities Press, New York, 1959, p. 92

It can be generally observed that cell phone, not only the possession of it but also its design, becomes part of the juvenile dress-code-system. In the Western hemisphere it is not only abnormal not to have a Mobile. Often it has to be one special model, with special features like mp3-player and camera. It offers so many different options of entertainment that it could not only replace the real, face-to-face communication, but also become part of their imagined identity.

5. The Cell phone as a “beloved object”

The British Psychoanalyst D.W.Winnicott developed in the 1950s the expression of the *transitional object* (Winnicott, 1951), which has a communicative function between the inner psychical subjective world of a child and the objective environment. At the beginning, a child cannot distinguish between a me and a you, it feels like being a symbiotic one with the mother¹³. While developing more cognitive capabilities, it realizes that it is a separated individual. In this very hurtful and scary process of individualisation from the mother a transitional object can help. It can replace the symbiotic relationship with the mother until the child can reach the *depressive position* (M.Klein, 1935). That means that it can accept and bear the end of the imagined unity with the mother and begin to explore the world as an individual. The transitional object can be in a doll or a teddy in a more conservative sense, more explicitly an object that has an emotional significance for the child.¹⁴ The German Psychologist Tilmann Habermas enhanced that idea of Winnicott to the concept of “*beloved, personal objects*” that even in the stage of adulthood have the function of demonstrating the own identity against the social environment:

„Als persönliche Objekte werden geliebte Gegenstände Erwachsener bezeichnet. Persönliche Objekte spielen eine wichtige Rolle im Prozess der

¹³Or the care-taker who doesn't necessarily has to be the biological mother

¹⁴ Compare to <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12916436>

*Identitätsbildung im Rahmen der Beziehung zu signifikanten Anderen. Persönliche Objekte unterscheiden sich zwar von Übergangsobjekten von Kleinkindern, stellen aber zugleich eine funktionelle Kontinuität dar.*¹⁵

Especially in critical situations we regress because we feel insecure and in that moments we often try to compensate the lack of security by revitalizing the relationship with the “*beloved object*”.¹⁶ In a footnote Burkhart mentions that a mobile phone could also be seen as a beloved object in the terms of Habermas.

At that point we can build a bridge to the “*handymania*”: the mobile phone as such is made to simplify and abbreviate communication, which is a traceable request at the labour market where “time is money”. But in our modern industrial societies, it has encroached to a common way of daily communication. Moreover, there emerged a special autarkic language to syncopate the (already) “*short message service*” (SMS) even more. It seems, as it somehow became an immanent need to check the mobile phone unobtrusively while being in a conversation with others. Otherwise you could probably miss if someone tries to reach you...but how mobile makes the Mobile than in fact?

6. Mobility versus Immobility

On one hand, mobile phones make the user more flexible and less locally bounded. It simplifies working and studying in other countries, because it reduces the fear to loose the social contacts while being abroad. Parents often buy their children mobiles, so they could reach

¹⁵ Tilmann Habermas at <http://www.psychanalyse.uni-frankfurt.de/personen/habermas/index.html>

¹⁶ Tilmann Habermas: *Geliebte Objekte. Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung*. Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1996

them in case of emergency. Just the option to do that makes them probably more relaxed and less restrictive.

Nowadays the cell phone even replaces the need to be physically present at a place to get an impression of the atmosphere, and that is extremely faster and more personal than watching television. You can even give somebody else a clear picture of the things you see, while being at the other side of the world: Via MMS, it became possible to make a picture with a mobile in New Zealand and receive it in less than a second in Berlin. Or someone can record the sound that a humming bird makes in Brazil and send it to a person in Europe, who then suddenly has the rainforest in his living room.

On the other Hand this creates also a special form of Immobility. These days, you do not have to be in a special office or room to communicate, but you have to be there where your mobile is. Only a few people are still using the telephone book because you can store all the numbers and addresses that you need in your cell phone.¹⁷

All these examples show, that the recent invention of the cell-phone-software should mainly attract the ones, who are not necessarily using it in their works, because at the moment the quality of these features (camera, recorder, video) cannot attract professionals. It seems that there has been a change of paradigms during the last ten years.

By the inflationary use of it, the need of distinction began to develop. More and more different designs were offered at the market, the mobile became a way to express yourself, like a habiliment or a special haircut.

¹⁷ A chummily friend of mine, who is a musician, seriously told me that he wouldn't be able to work anymore, if he loses his mobile, another one, who is a student, likely would be late at class than going out without having her mobile in her bag.

III. Conclusion

It cannot be denied that the invention of the cell phone has offered our societies plenty of possibilities. We are more flexible, and more open to discover other countries and cultures. This option can equalize injustices caused by location advantages or disadvantages. It can lead to more tolerance between national groups just through the opportunity of getting to know each other. Pupils and students may easier risk studying abroad if they have the option to stay in contact with their parents and friends every time and everywhere. But we should be very careful of becoming “slaves” of our own inventions. If we start to mix up the rational advantage of using a mobile with an irrational addiction to the cell phone like a modern, world-wide-spreader fetish, we will not be able to benefit from our mobilised communication technology.

If the base of a democratic ethos is, like Habermas says, the act of reasonable and reflective communication, would not it be negligent to eliminate it through reduction, shortening and adulteration? If such a social pathology as the “*handyman*” can occur, and not just as a single phenomenon in Germany, but also as the surveys proof, all over the world, there seems to be a real danger behind it. Eminently for these teenagers who are not so lucky to grow up in a social atmosphere of a vivid culture of communicative interaction, the personal contacts could be replaced by communication in chat rooms via internet or SMS. And for those who made the step to discover a foreign culture, they are eventually not able to enjoy their experience entirely because they are always with “one ear” at home.

I think it is necessary that parents, instead of legitimate the acquisition of a cell phone with a surge of security, should emphasize the importance of personal responsibility and reliability. Nevertheless,

mobile communication is a part of our modern society and the denial of its usage would be regressive and out of touch with reality.

But there are options in between, which Burkhart also mentions: When the Internet was established in India, they made it intentionally slower than it could be. They justified it with a respectful attitude among the written word and among the people who read and write it.¹⁸ I think that this mindset could be a reasonable compromise between idealizing the former, post-modern society and surfing on the new wave of total mobility without looking back.

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