

Perceptions of Separation: place, space and the experience of the mobile phone

Ann Light
Queen Mary, University of London

Literature on mobile phones and their social impact upon individuals falls principally into two parts: those studies that explore the social behaviour that emerges from use of a communication mechanism that is closely associated with the individual - eg on status (Dant 1999), on design and personalization (Ruuska-Kalliokulju et al 2000), on sharing (Berg et al 2003) - and those that look at mobility and how it alters the individual's relationship to space, location and social group - eg Gant and Kiesler (2001) and Weilenmann and Leuchovius (2004). There is also a cyborg literature, concerned with the assimilation of the machine into the person and vice versa, but this has tended to take a political (Haraway) or artistic (Stellarc) stance rather than focus on the impact of integrating a particular communications technology, although Clark (2003) partially redresses this balance by discussing the impact of a cell phone apparatus 'lightly implanted in the skull' (p171), a step on from today's devices which he already calls 'prime, if entry-level, cyborg technology' (p27). A small philosophical literature has asked: is your mobile part of your mind? (in particular, Preston 2005), but rejected the hypothesis.

The study described here is still in its early phases, but it seeks to unite these themes by asking about integrating the tool-cum-medium of mobile telephony into the personal sphere. It asks about the experience of using a mobile phone, through detailed interviews with several regular mobile phone users, and contrasts this with accounts of the experience of using a landline, with its different spatial context of being fixed in the workplace or home (see Lacohee and Anderson, 2001, for a discussion of the telephone in domestic space).

Accounts of receiving two kinds of call are being collected from participants: the last call received on a mobile phone and the last call received on a landline. It is possible that participants will be divided into two groups, those that grew up with mobile phones and those that learnt to use them after their childhood. All the material will be analysed for elements of the accounts that point to differences between experience of a location-specific and environmentally-situated call and experience of a person-situated, ambiguously-located call.

While, at present, the integration of phone into body is only partial, with tools such as Bluetooth earpieces showing the way, it is possible that already the separation of phone and self is reduced. Is this the case, is this altered mediation, or 'readiness to hand' also changing the nature of the experience of connectedness of self and other?

Incoming calls have been made the focus of the project to move away from the notion of empowering tools, characterised by McLuhan's 'extensions of man' and found in much literature (eg Preston 2005). Though the less palatable side of enhancement by communication device is touched on in

Clark's (2003) discussion of 'intrusion', he sees this in relation to privacy and others knowing where and how to locate you; in other words, the phone is an embedded device that will signal location. The idea that a mobile phone is a medium as well as a tool seems to have received less attention in the context of increasing integration. But there is, arguably, the potential for 'penetration' by others as the medium moves closer to the body, as well as an enhanced capacity for connecting remotely.

The tension between the virtual context of the call and the actual context of the conversants is known to create presentation issues (see, for instance, Truch and Hulme 2004). Although the impact of connecting two environments will be felt by both call maker and call receiver, the receiver has had less time to prepare for the change in context and therefore, one might anticipate, is the more disrupted. The duration of the ring is, in effect, the preparation time available to the receiver of the call. It will be interesting to explore whether people receiving calls raise these issues directly or implicitly in any way, and, if so, whether signs of the tension created through the introduction of another context and a sudden connection to others appear in the same degree when receiving a call on a mobile and a landline. (Other factors, such as ringtones personalized to the caller and the caller ID on mobiles, will of course affect the experience in ways that are intrinsic to the device, not the location of the device and this will need to be considered.)

The study uses an interviewing technique developed to reveal subtle changes in perception (Light and Wakeman 2001) through non-directive interviewing and discourse analysis of interviewees' accounts. It is not the first study of mobile phone use to analyse users' talk, but unlike, say, Weilenmann and Leuchovius (2004) which adopts conversation analytic methods to explore ways of indicating location during calls, it is a retrospective method of working and focuses on descriptions of experience, rather than the content of calls themselves.

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