

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society

Reviewed by Steve Love, Brunel University, UK

The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's  
Impact on Society

By Rich Ling

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Mobile telecommunications such as voice telephony, SMS, WLAN (wireless local-area network) technology, and personal digital assistants (PDAs) are being used by broader and broader sections of society. As a result of this increased usage (particularly for mobile-phone use), there is a small but growing body of research that indicates that the use of mobile communications is influencing how we go about our daily lives from both a social and economic perspective. For example, as mobile-phone usage increases, it is no longer unusual to see mobile phones being used in a wide variety of contexts (e.g., social, business) in various locations (e.g., trains, cafes). Wei and Leung (1999) found that the majority of calls being made by mobile-phone users take place on the streets, on public transport, in shops, and in restaurants.

What is the social impact of mobile-phone use in public places and society in general? This is the question that Rich Ling sets out to investigate in his book *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*.

Ling's book, through a detailed description and analysis of several studies, provides us with a valuable insight into how this relatively new form of technology is changing people's social dynamics in public life. In particular, he focuses on how the mobile phone can be used to create a sense of security for the individual, its use in what he calls the "micro-coordination" of everyday life, and the impact the mobile phone has had on the lives of teenagers. In addition, he raises the possibility that the mobile phone could be a disturbing influence in our public life (we all have experienced sitting next to someone on a train having a loud mobile-phone conversation) and takes a detailed look at the SMS communication phenomenon.

The first two chapters of the book provide the reader with general background information on the growth of the worldwide mobile-phone market and also provide an

interesting account of the history of mobile telephony. In Chapter 2, the focus is on discussing theories that examine the interaction between society and technology. The first theory Ling considers is technical determinism and its premise that it is technologies that shape society, not society that shapes the use and development of technologies. He points out that technologies do not “spring fully formed from the head of Zeus” and that there has to be some consideration given to the social context in which technologies are developed. On the other hand, social determinism as put forward by Bijker and Law (1992) suggests that technologies are constantly reevaluated by users and given new functions. The emphasis here is on the user to determine the use to which the technology can be put to. For example, although a mobile phone is primarily a communication device, Ling puts forward an idea that other acceptable uses can be found for this device too, such as it being used as a hammer-like device.

A compromise on these two perspectives is offered by the theory of affordances, first proposed by Gibson (1979) and developed later by Norman (1990). From this perspective, the physical qualities of an object interact with the way we interpret how it should be used. For example, the buttons on a computer screen afford pushing. Another compromise theory discussed in this chapter is the domestication of information and communication technologies (Silverstone & Haddon, 1996), and Ling states that this approach has been the theoretical influence on the research work he presents and discusses in the remaining chapters of the book. Essentially, this is seen as a pragmatic approach between social determinism and technological determinism, with the emphasis being placed on assessing how individuals themselves make sense of the situation that they currently find themselves in.

In addition, Ling is also influenced from a theoretical perspective by the work of Erving Goffman. In his book entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) suggested that people have specific “public faces” and personas for different social locations. For Goffman, the central issue was to describe the situations that individuals were in and not to describe the individuals themselves. The idea behind this is that individuals have rules that determine their behaviour in public places, or what Burns (1992) refers to as the “observance of social propriety.”

Chapter 2 finishes off with a discussion of the methods used to collect the data presented in the book, and these range from qualitative interviews to quantitative data collection and analysis.

In Chapter 3, the discussion moves on to discuss how the mobile phone is having an impact on our social lives. Here the emphasis is on safety and security. One of the main reasons individuals give for purchasing a mobile phone is to be able to use it in case of emergencies. Examples are given of what people classify as emergencies, such as an individual taking his or her mobile phone when going to remote places in case they run into difficulties, and teenagers calling for a lift when they miss the bus home. In addition, the mobile phone is also shown as being the cause of creating insecure situations, such as using your mobile phones while driving. This problem is being tackled in countries such as the UK, where it is now illegal to use a mobile phone while driving unless you are using a hands-free set. Having said that, a casual observation on any street will also show that at present, this is still being ignored by a large number of people.

In Chapter 4, the emphasis is on how the mobile phone allows individuals to micro-coordinate their activities while they

are on the move. There is a social etiquette for timekeeping, and the mobile phone offers a dynamic dimension to this. For example, we all know, as Ling points out, that it is not really socially acceptable to arrive too late or too early for a social engagement. However, we also know that things happen that can result in us breaking these timekeeping social guidelines (such as the train being delayed). Now with the advent of mobile phones, people have the opportunity to constantly update their social planning and adhere to these timekeeping guidelines. For example, it is now expected that someone should call you on your mobile phone if they are going to be late to meet you in a café as this gives you the opportunity to carry out what Ling refers to as a “midcourse adjustment.”

However, there are instances when the individual has to adhere to clock time and not time schedules agreed on through the dynamic use of mobile phones. For example, even though your train may be delayed, the plane you are trying to catch at the airport will not wait for you. Also, institutions such as schools set their times by the clock, not the socially negotiated timescales of individuals. Ling concludes that although mobile phones can be used to supplement the time to coordinate activities, this is, by and large, confined to small-group situations.

The adoption of mobile phones by teenagers to facilitate their social interactions is the focus of Chapter 5. Taking a cross-cultural perspective, Ling highlights how the mobile phone is used by adolescents to create a dynamic and tight social network that allows the members to have what he calls an “anytime-anywhere-for whatever reason” relationship with other members of the group. Perhaps this group, more than any other, has used mobile phones to maintain and develop social networks.

In Chapter 6, Ling talks about a subject that is very topical in relation to mobile phones: the intrusive nature of mobile telephony. We all have examples of when we have been the victims (and if we really think hard, perpetrators) of what some may consider to be the socially inappropriate use of mobile phones. In relation to this, Ling highlights the fact that how mobile phones are used in public has become an element in the definition of socially appropriate or inappropriate behaviour. In one study, he found that people perceived mobile-phone use in places such as restaurants as unacceptable, partly because people tend to talk louder than usual when using mobile phones and as a result of this, individuals located near mobile-phone users felt coerced into eavesdropping into their conversation. In relation to this, we have seen in the UK a kind of backlash against this social intrusion with mobile-phone companies issuing guides on mobile etiquette, encouraging sensible and responsible mobile-phone behaviour in public places and train companies providing mobile-phone-free carriages for passengers.

In Chapter 7, the phenomenon that is SMS or text messaging is discussed. Ling quotes an amazing statistic in relation to SMS in Norway, whereby there are roughly 280,000 SMS messages sent, on average, every hour (Norway has a population of about 5 million people). In countries that have followed in the wake of the Scandinavian uptake of mobile telephony, a similar picture is emerging. Amongst teenagers, it is the preferred mode of communication, partly due to the cheap cost of sending a message, but also due, in part, to its unobtrusiveness. A young teenager can be happily texting messages to friends in his or her bedroom while at the same time his or her parents are mistaking the silence coming from the teenager’s room as evi-

dence of their child concentrating on homework. Also, in relation to what is discussed in Chapter 6 in regard to timekeeping, people often use text messaging as a way of rearranging times to meet up with people or perhaps even canceling an appointment altogether. This is much easier than having to talk to the person and going through excuses on the spot.

A major focus of Chapter 8 is on the effect of the mobile phone on social cohesion in general. On the one hand, there can be no doubt that the mobile phone allows us to move out of the current social context we are in to a shared virtual space with the individual (or individuals) that we are interacting with. This may have a negative effect on those in close physical proximity to us in our immediate social context as they may feel aggrieved that we have dropped them from the social situation or feel uncomfortable because we are using the social situation in a way that they feel is inappropriate. However, on the other hand, as can be seen from the research quoted in relation to teenagers, the mobile phone provides people with the opportunity to create and maintain stronger peer-group bonds. In one sense, the question of the effects of mobile phones on social cohesion cannot yet be fully answered as we are still in the middle of a phenomenon that is about to take another twist with the advent of 3G phones and services.

Overall, this is a book that I would recommend to anyone (undergraduate stu-

dents, doctoral students, and those working in the area of mobile-phone research and development) interested in assessing the social impact of mobile-phone use. It is an important area that must be considered and understood.

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