The Cell Phone as an Agent of Social Change

Abu Sadat Nurullah, University of Alberta
Social change refers to the transformation of culture and social institutions throughout time, which is usually brought about by collective behavior (Kendall, 2004). The widespread adoption of the cell phone as a tool of communication and entertainment has revolutionized society, redefining patterns of social contact and relationships among individuals. Overall, the cell phone has transformed daily life of individuals to such an extent that it can be thought of as an agent of social change. As a personalized device, it has provided individuals with more personal freedom. Conversely, it has blurred the boundary between personal and public life. Together with everyday uses of the cell phone as a communication device, the gadget has become a fashion tool, a device to shape individuals’ identity and prestige, creating a new subculture especially in the case of adolescents.

Although the cell phone has impacted people of all ages, studies have shown that adolescents have been the most avid user group in all countries (Grinner & Eldridge, 2001; Haddon, 2002; Haste, 2005; Ito & Okabe, 2005a). For instance, it is not a rare sight to find teenagers in Asia, Europe, and other parts of the world “thumbing” their handheld devices in urban public spaces, experiencing a new way to express identity, rooted in and giving rise to a new subculture with its own norms, values, and patterns of behavior. Research has identified similarities in communication practices related to the use of cell phones in Bulgaria, Finland, Israel, Italy, Korea, France, the Netherlands, and the U.S. (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). By illustrating studies conducted in different parts of the world, this paper argues that the cell phone is not only an essential gadget for maintaining social contact, but also a device that has broad social impact on family relations, peer relations, socialization, identity formation, and norms in public places.

**Subculture**

The use of the cell phone is considered as a new “culture” or “subculture” in reference to youth (Ling, 2002; Lorente, 2002; Ito & Okabe, 2005a). The device itself is becoming a cultural artifact that shapes cultural flows (Satchell, 2004). Studies show that adolescents’ use of cell phones around the world is characterized by, among other things, the heavy use of SMS (text messaging), gaming, picture messaging, and “moblogging” (mobile blogging) (Ling, 2002; Perttierra, 2005). As a subculture, then, it manifests itself by being integrated in the norms and rites of the larger culture. Examples of such integration include the use of cell phones as the marker of a kind of “passage rite” (Lorente, 2002, p. 8), the emergence of social norms governing use of cell phones in public places (Humphreys, 2003), and increasing individualistic tendencies among adolescents (Perttierra, 2005). Perttierra (2005) even asserts that the cell phone interacts with local socio-cultural conditions, giving rise to indigenized applications of global technology.
Texting

Much literature reports heavy use of SMS by adolescents in most parts of the world (Haste, 2005; Ling, 2004; Thurlow, 2003). Thurlow (2003) states that adolescents are both the driving force behind and at the same time slaves of a growing text messaging culture. Texting is the preferred mode of contact for nearly all social and communication activities, socialization, and self-expression of the adolescent (Grinter & Elridge, 2001; Haste, 2005). Adolescents are also the quickest to adopt text messaging (Grinter & Elridge, 2001).

Many cross-cultural studies try to identify the particular gratifications granted by text messaging to the adolescent user group, and not to any other group. Some of these gratifications include being able to avoid “unnecessary” conversations, to present a different self-image, to not disturb the rules of good behavior (e.g., answering a call in public places), speed, easier use, certainty of the arrival of a message (as opposed to a call that might not be answered), and cost-effectiveness (Grinter & Elridge, 2001; Haddon, 2002; Höfl ich & Rössler, 2002; Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002; Oksman, 2006).

Peripheral Features

Studies report widespread use of the cell phone for reasons other than as a tool for communication by adolescents, such as for playing games, downloading ringtones and wallpapers, using features such as the camera and radio, picture sending, mobile entertainment, mobile television, as a locational device, alarm clock, address book and other aspects of personalization and entertainment (Koskinen, 2008; Lorente, 2002; Wong & Hiew, 2005). Other peripheral features of the device include avoiding boredom, staying updated, maintaining background entertainment while doing other things, and creating a space of one’s own (Koskinen, 2008); emancipation from local settings (Humphreys, 2003); socialization in response to a communication partner in a given media environment (Höfl ich & Rössler, 2002); engagement in “time-killing” activities, and relaxation (Leung & Wei, 2000). In this process, peripheral features of the cell phone become as popular as (and in some cases more popular than) the primary features.

Gender Differences

Adolescents consider the cell phone as important in their lives, girls more so than boys (Oksman, 2006). According to previous studies, boys and girls use SMS differently, the latter using it more than former (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Haste, 2005; Lorente, 2002). Research explains how the cell phone levels the gender differences between boys and girls, both genders adopting the technology at similar rates precisely by giving rise to “gendered” subcultures (Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002, p. 106). Therefore, while girls use it primarily as a tool for communication and maintenance of peer groups and contacts, and social aspects (such as design, ring tone, and color), boys use it more for its own sake, solitarily, exploring its features, and as a toy (Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002).

Additional Gratifications

Studies have tried to delineate some of the gratifications that cell phones provide to the adolescent users in particular. Most of the gratifications of cell phones can be clustered around the themes of contribution to identity-formation; maintenance of peer group networks; and emancipation from local settings. Aspects of sociability include formation and maintenance of peer group networks, maintenance of romantic relationships, escape from parental surveillance, coordination of group activities, organization and management of social life,
A sense of belongingness, membership in a group, as a bonding device for friends and family, personal security, prestige, constant availability, and keeping in touch with geographically distant relations (Grinter & Elridge, 2001; Haddon, 2002; Haste, 2005; Ito & Okabe, 2005b; Ling, 2004; Lorente, 2002; Oksman, 2006; Pertierra, 2005; Satchell, 2003). Studies that have examined various aspects of identity reflected as gratifications of the cell phone specifically for adolescents across cultures include the following: influencing fashion, giving of phones by parents to children as a marker of “maturity,” privacy, emotional, personal and psychological attachment to the device, and personalization of the device as a statement of one’s identity (Haddon, 2002; Ling, 2002; Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002; Oksman, 2006; Wong & Hiew, 2005).

ADOLESCENT IDENTITY

The exceptional popularity of the cell phone among youth can be linked back to their need for an individual identity, maintenance of friendship networks, and emancipation from family ties. Moreover, as Geser (2004) points out, without possessing fixed addresses and stationary resources, cell phone connection is the only thing that anchors them to the society. Ling (2002) states that the use of the cell phone helps define adolescents vis-à-vis older generations. Its real impact is in terms of its ability to define adolescents’ identity.

The “emancipation” of adolescents from their parents is a contributing factor to the formation of their identity. Höfl ich and Rössler (2002) state that the obtrusiveness of cell phones is sometimes used in a provocative manner by adolescents in order to challenge the social world of adults and to show resistance to it, thereby strengthening a subculture as well as constructing an identity. Besides the emancipation from adults and maintenance of friendship networks, cell phones contribute to identity assertion by being highly personal devices, with a vast scope for further personalization. Pertierra (2005) reports the sentiment that the cell phone as a personal device is a style statement.

PATTERNS OF INTERACTION

Parents

The pattern of interaction between youth and parents is reflected as a “digital leash” (Haddon, 2002, p. 119) to increase control over their kids on the one hand, and teenagers viewing it as a means of independence from their parents on the other. The cell phone affects two areas of interaction when considering the relationship of teens to their parents: on the one hand it allows for better coordination within the family, and on the other, it brings up issues surrounding the emancipation of the teen across cultures (Geser, 2004; Ling, 2000; Lorente, 2002). Therefore, although the cell phone might solve the problem of organization and logistics, it cannot solve persistent parent-child communication issues, such as quality and flow of communication.

Peer Groups

The cell phone is inevitably a godsend to adolescents, helping them augment existing networks. Lorente (2002) emphasizes that the cell phone is a keeper of primary group ties or peer group networks. It also creates a “virtual fraternity” providing the lonely adolescent the gratifications of contact with friends (Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002). The acquisition and adoption of the cell phone among adolescents have been linked to peer pressure (Wong & Hiew, 2005). Nevertheless, adolescents might and do cultivate friendships with individuals with whom they would otherwise not have been allowed to do so. Ling and Yttri (2002) have formulated the term “hyper-coordination” to explain the expressive and socially active uses of cell
phones by Norwegian teens. According to Perttierra (2005), expansion of friendship networks through the cell phone is common in the Philippines. This, however, is not corroborated by studies elsewhere. Japanese researchers have argued that cell phones have made adolescents selective in their relationships rather than superficial (Matsuda, 2000, as cited in Ito & Okabe, 2005a), suggesting that some adolescents might not so readily expand their friendship networks through their cell phones.

**Prestige**

The question of whether the cell phone is seen as a symbol of status within the adolescent subculture has been dealt with in a number of studies. The unexpected rate at which cell phone technology has been developed and adopted has made it a very popular phenomenon, and as such it is no longer associated with prestige, as was the case only a few years ago (Höflich & Rössler, 2002; Lorente, 2002). However, some studies indicate that the cell phone might in some ways still be a source of social prestige. For instance, the cell phone might act as the barometer of an adolescent’s social life in the amount of messages and calls he or she receives, thereby contributing to aspects of social prestige (Lobet-Maris & Henin, 2002, p. 110). Likewise, a significant percentage of adolescents in Finland who did not have a cell phone reported feeling left out of social interactions and sometimes felt pressured by friends to get a cell phone (Ling, 2004).

**The Cell Phone’s Impact on Social Institutions**

Ling (2000) analyzes the effect of the cell phone on four existing social institutions: democracy, bureaucracy, the educational system, and adolescence. He suggests that the cell phone can assist in promoting democracy, as text messages serve as the confirmation of one’s group membership to a political party. Thus, it is often seen as a positive (or the “ideal type”) contribution to the functioning of the bureaucracy (Ling, 2000). The educational system is also affected by the cell phone, as sending text messages eliminates the need for physical note taking (Ling, 2000) and instructors can integrate in-class texting in curricula (Carvin, 2006). Moreover, the cell phone allows students to establish a communication channel with their peers over which their parents and teachers have little insight (Ling, 2000).

Texting has even begun to affect the standards of writing and language. David Crystal (2008) analyzes how texting has transformed the patterns of language usage among young people. He calls it “textspeak,” characterized by its distinctive graphology. Its key feature is rebus abbreviation, where words are formed by representation of letters as syllables, as used in “b,” “b4,” “NE,” and “ur,” and is made of logograms, such as numerals and symbols, as seen in “&,” “@,” “2,” and “sum1” (Crystal, 2008). Textspeak has its own range of direct-address items, such as “F2T” (free to talk?), “PCM” (please call me), “RUOK” (are you OK?), and “SWDYT” (So what do you think?) (Crystal, 2008, pp. 80-81). Some teachers have even considered embracing texting as a legitimate form of writing worth studying in schools, as an important form of subcultural language (Donovan, 2006).

**Mobile Internet**

Ito and Okabe (2005b) report that heavy “keitai e-mail” (all types of textual and pictorial transmission via cell phones) users in urban Japan provides one window into new kinds of social situations, called technosocial situations. This leads to what Ichiro Nakajima, Keiichi Himeno, and Hiroaki Yoshii describe as a “full-time intimate community,” where people experience a sense
of a persistent social space constituted through the periodic exchange of text messages (cited in Ito & Okabe, 2005b, p. 7). This includes e-mail exchanging present information about one’s general status that is similar to being physically co-located, a sigh or smile or glance that calls attention to the communicator (Ito & Okabe, 2005b). Furthermore, the increasingly widespread use of iPhones and Blackberries in the U.S. and Canada has emphasized the everyday concept of Internet use through cell phones.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper illustrates the way the cell phone has transformed existing social institutions by creating a new subculture through extensive adoption of cell phones as communication and entertainment devices. In line with the fact that adolescents are the most avid users of cell phones all over the world, this paper explores the way this gadget becomes an agent of social change in the hands of active and economically and politically influential youths. It has been argued that cell phone culture has revolutionized teenage life across diverse cultures with its own norms, values, and patterns of behavior, which is radically different from the pre-cell phone era. The consequence is the increasing “virtualization” of social contact, as well as new patterns of social interaction among people.

As a subculture, the cell phone has different usage pattern for adolescents and older generations. For the former group, it is regarded as “cultural artifact,” agent of socialization, personalized device, and higher sensitivity in terms of parental contact. Adolescents are also the group who heavily use SMS, play games, and other peripheral functions more often than the older age group. There is gendered use of the cell phone: girls hold this as important in their lives as well as send more SMS than boys. There are many gratifications involved in using the cell phone, as it creates of sense of belonging, bonding with friends and family, constant availability, and keeping in touch with long distance relations. It also shapes the identity and prestige of adolescents across cultures.

The cell phone also reshapes the social norms of talking in public places. It has enormous impact on existing social institutions. With the expansion of the Internet on cell phone devices, the nature of social contact has transformed into creating new “technosocial situations” where people are always available. This paper implies correlations between cell phone ownership and important social and psychological variables, such as identity and prestige. Therefore, every change in public policy and each new innovation in technology must take into account the impact it has on the social lives of youth.

**REFERENCES**


