

From Party Lines To Public Parties:

Communication Aspects of Mobile Telephony

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From the moment Alexander Graham Bell *shouted* the famous words “Mr. Watson come here. I want you,” (Mitchell, p.250) the world has become a very different place. Never before have time and space been compressed with the instant gratification of the telephone connection. The more recent developments of mobile telephony and automated telephone systems have dramatically changed interpersonal communication patterns and with it, a complex system of rules has evolved.

Beginning as far back as the early 1900s (Singer) telephone ‘culture’ has developed as a reflection of the social customs and communication needs of a society. With the rise of the Internet and urbanization, interpersonal communications take a turn towards a one-way transfer of information - e-mail, answering machines, voicemail and automated telephone services. Space expansion and work mobility on the other hand gave rise to the cellular phone network in the 1970s. Present day cell phones are the product of each of these processes, and over time their design and functionality has changed to reflect the social and communication value of telephoning.

Not surprisingly, in today’s commercialized and entertainment-driven society, the focus of telephony is shifting from functionality to entertainment - among cell phone fashion and other multimedia features, ringtone art is becoming more and more popular and even necessary in the dense acoustic spectrum.

Therefore, an exploration into the history and implications of these processes will generate a more thorough understanding of the role of cell phones in our current communication reality. Some of these questions have also been a basis for a web-form survey that I have developed and collected from a semi-random sample of Internet-savvy participants¹.

Functionality First

The development of telephony directly reflects the needs, issues and priorities of a society. Telephones became popular at a time when the space between family members and friends was widening and urban alienation was on the rise (Aronson, p.301). Rural communities, which were especially vulnerable to isolation and had limited access to health care and other emergency services, readily welcomed the telephone in their lives.

Yet this transition was anything but smooth and required much more habituation than it would seem from a current perspective. The sudden intimacy of a recognizable

¹ See Appendix One

voice directly in the ear without the visualization of a person proved to be quite a disturbing reality to some in the early days of telephone.

Many authors writing about that era cite examples of telephone communication where the need to 'see' the person on the other side is so strong that "some of us go as far as to ask 'What are you wearing?'... [and] many just volunteer that information in an apparent effort to help the caller visualize them." (Mitchell, p.249).

Another obvious inconsistency of the telephone is the narrowband sound quality which collides with the perceived closeness of the voice while reinforcing the feeling of physical distance - this explains why a lot of people to this day feel that they have to speak up on the phone. Indeed in those days the telephone was truly a 'cool' medium in Marshal McLuhan's terms (Mitchell, p.249) - the ear and the voice had to strive to convey all aural and visual information.

The design follows the purpose

This conceptual pattern was also reflected in the design of the telephone. The two separate parts of the device - a mouthpiece and a receiver piece would involve both hands and assume active participation. Modeled on the common knowledge that if something produces loud noise it needs attention, the first ringtones were mechanical ringing sounds very much alarm-sounding, summoning the recipient to take the call. Even I have grown up in the 1980s with a classic Russian telephone which generated sound very much like an old alarm clock - by two metallic domes side by side and a ringing hammer in between.

It is hard to imagine such concentrated effort today with mobile phones, voice mail service and call display, where everything is digital, automated, instant. Ear-bud phones and headsets eliminate almost all tactile participation, leaving the hands free for all other 'important' tasks that need to be performed while on the phone. In fact, mobile telephones are quite a 'hot' medium in McLuhan's terms since there is so little to do! They are highly automated and user-friendly and virtually everyone is an 'expert' in telephone interaction. As a result, calling is often quite a distracted task.

Party Lines

At first glance it might seem odd that so much sociological research following the telephone has been conducted in rural America. After all, the telephone emerged as an urban novelty, both exhibiting and producing a 'psychological quality of modernity" (Fischer, p.243). Yet the telephone in the early 1900s had almost anti-modern qualities in

that it was precisely the party line network in rural areas that kept communities close together and preserved shared values and social customs (Aronson, p.304).

Rick Hampson recalls in a telephone history documentary the fascinating culture of party lines: "Maybe you remember when eavesdropping was as easy as picking up the phone; when, instead of urging us to "reach out and touch someone," the telephone company warned not to talk too long." Well, today eavesdropping is as easy as walking out the door! Anywhere we go, on the street, on the bus, there is someone talking on a cell phone, so in some post modern way we are never *alone*. In a way cell phones are like a modern version of public party lines.

By 1920, party lines made up close to 10% of urban American cities, and over 60% of rural towns (Hampson). This reality gave rise to a complex aural-oral communication and etiquette system which is very much extinct today - long and short rings signaled who should pick up the phone, a special combination of rings invited everyone to enter the line to "warn of trouble or spread good news" and of course everybody recognized the "guilty click" of an embarrassed eavesdropper leaving the shared line (Hampson). These aural cues, once soundmarks of party line communities, have almost completely died out today, leaving the descendants from that era to remember them as 'sound romance' (Truax).

The Forgotten Sounds

Among ringtones and other aural signals, the 'line free,' 'line busy' and 'line dialing' sounds have also become universal aural cues, regardless of the fact that none of them represent any actual sound in the telephone circuit. Although they are still present today in home phones, they are in the process of extinction in cell phones and wireless communication devices – transmission is almost entirely digital, and text-based, rather than vocal. The 'line free' signal is already eliminated while the 'line busy' and 'line dialing' sounds are still being simulated because of their universal recognition.

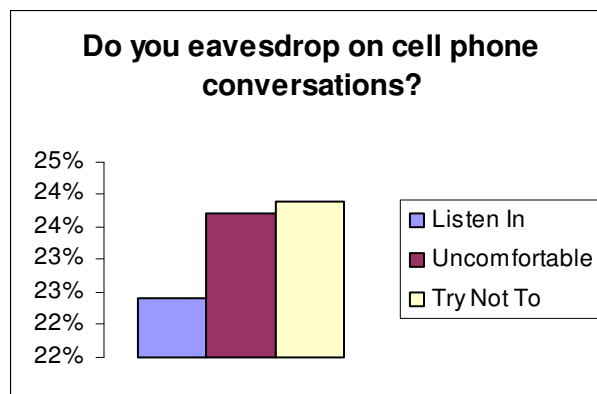
Telephone Etiquette - 1900s to Today

Along with aural communication cues, a complex system of courtesy has emerged dating back to the party line culture. Because of the communal nature of party lines, people had to develop rules and regulations amongst themselves about what is acceptable telephone usage and what isn't. These rules were also heavily enforced by the

telephone company's advertising². All subscribers were to be very careful not to hold up the line for too long, since someone else might need it.

Calls of social nature and gossip were strongly discouraged and treated as 'women's chitchat,' getting in the way of serious business. Not surprisingly, all telephone etiquette columns from the early 1990s through 1934, mostly published in women's magazines, advised women not to 'tie up the lines' with their 'idle gossip' (Fischer, p.184). "I still get that feeling, too, if I've been talking for a while," shares Eleanor Arnold of Rushville, Indiana in a survey in 1998 – she had a party line until 1969 (Hampson). Another interesting fact about telephone etiquette was that under no circumstances was one to ever invite people over the phone (Fischer, p.184). That was considered very rude and bad style, since a telephone invitation will pressure the recipient to accept even if they have other plans. It was not until 1947 that telephone invitations became accepted and not until 1955 that calling before a visit became popular (p.184).

Again, it is hard nowadays to think of the telephone, line or mobile, in any other terms than social and interpersonal. It is also hard to imagine such consideration for time on the phone when everyone has their own private line, and can spend as much time on it as they need, while all the rest of us are willingly or unwillingly eavesdropping. However, while with party lines, people eavesdropped with a sense of guilt because they were invading someone's privacy, in my 'cell phone age' survey, only 23.9% indicated they tried not to listen in, another 23.7% said they were uncomfortable to be in the presence of phone conversations but sometimes they eavesdropped, and a full 22.4% admitted openly they listen in especially if they are bored.



² See Appendix Two

Rising of One-Way Communication models

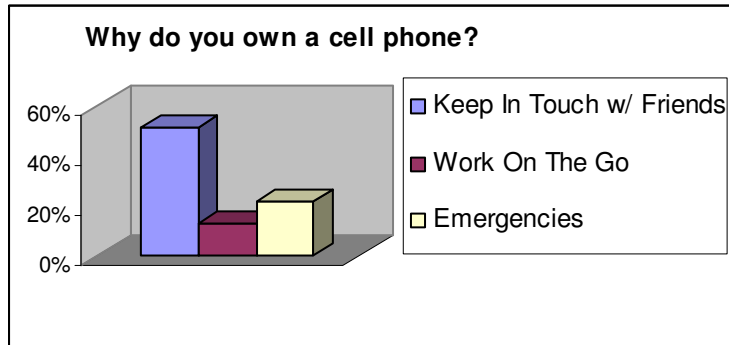
The invention of Internet marks a distinct period in North American and world history, when people had finally transitioned to a more global perspective of citizenship that has come to be known as the 'global village,' termed by Marshal McLuhan. After WWII, massive waves of immigration concentrated in North America. Combined with an increase in world travels this gave rise to the need for a global communication venue - one which spanned across space and time in a cheap, efficient manner.

Internet, and specifically e-mail easily filled this role, creating a communication culture of instant one-way transmission of information. The concept of closeness moved beyond the immediate physical reality into the virtual world. However in doing so it lost an important aspect: instant reciprocity. This is precisely what mobile telephones appear to make up for - bring the closeness of a familiar voice anywhere, anytime. Only, instead, the reality of mobile phones has now created a completely different communication model and set of cultural rules.

The Purpose Follows the Design

Throughout the 1980s, the business aspect of the mobile phone was reinforced by the quick and widespread automation of communication services in order to save time and money in processing business transactions. A cell phone, for example, could be an automated 'receptionist' for a small business (Katz, p.23). By all means, telephone automated systems must have put tons of receptionists out of work! Thus, rather than bringing back the closeness of an instant contact across space, mobile phones simply settle into the paradigm of an existing one-way communication flow - accessing automated telephone services, answering machines and touch-tone menus.

It is not until early 1992 that the social role of the cell phone begins to significantly shift from business to interpersonal communication (Katz, p.13). As reiterated in my web survey, only 13% have their cell phone for work - less than those who keep it for emergencies - while over 50% say the reason they own a cell phone is to keep in touch with friends:



Voice/E-Mail

A sociological survey from the 80s shows little satisfaction with using automated telephone services (Singer, p.85) and sometimes outright frustration with using answering machines (Singer, p. 72). While this is understandable for the time period considering the culture of in-person interaction, it is hard to imagine, thinking in present terms, voice mail as an obstacle rather than a necessary and assumed telephone feature. Indeed much has changed. It seems that we have not only grown accustomed to one-way communication flows but we even prefer and actively seek it. As the inventor of voice mail, Gordon Mathews declares, rather than us using voice mail to our own ends, “voice mail manages us” (Martin-Moris, p.28). Many of us call when we know the person isn’t in and leave messages, or pretend not to be available and let the voice mail take it.

Inevitably, this pattern of interaction materializes in cell phone communication as well. As e-mail and voice mail permeate our information environment, wireless telephony adopts a new ritual – text messaging. Instant messaging is the perfect blend of standardized e-mail lingo and wireless portable mobility. It proves to be perfect for transmitting messages in a non-engaging, less personal manner, without the complexity of verbal or non-verbal language.

Why Go Wireless?

As life grows more hectic by the year in North America, the need to stay informed and up-to-date increases. By 1995, Katz shows that the perceived primary reason to go wireless is staying in touch - 48.8% of his participants say their responsibilities require them to be easily reachable, or to be contacted about important matters (p.9). 48.9% say they stay in touch even when they are on vacation (p.9).

According to James Katz Americans invented the mobile phone because they love to travel and like to keep in touch with their friends in the meantime (p.7). Indeed they

traveled - after the 60s, the improved financial situation in North America led to increasing commute times, more urban alienation and spreading out of cities. This created continuous periods of time during which people feel unavailable so phones needed to leave the home and get with the commuters. By 1975 when the first mobile phones appeared in the US (mobile phones didn't come to Canada until 1985³), there already was a perceived need to stay in touch, to be constantly available.

The sheer numbers of cell phone subscribers has been exponentially on the rise since the mid-1990s, and today, along with various multimedia features, cell phones have to compete against numerous other communication devices - Blackberries, wireless notebooks and PDAs GSMs.

In other words, the pervasiveness of cell phones creates a reality where "the absent are never without fault; nor the present without excuse" (Katz, p.14). This resonates with my current web survey where 23.7% of the participants say the biggest disadvantage of having a cell phone is being reachable at all times.

Interestingly, even in the early 1990s this need to be reachable was more pronounced among those who already owned a cell phone compared to those who did not (Katz, p.57). This establishes a trend that we can easily identify today - the more people own cell phones, the harder it becomes for the rest of us to stay 'in the loop' of things, to be in touch, to be informed, even to participate in cultural activities. Call-in television shows with a text-messaging number advertised on the screen is just one example of how the assumption that one owns a cell phone works to exclude many of us from this cultural interaction. Just having been in Bulgaria, a country which has marked a mobile phone penetration rate of several hundred percent in the last three years, the trend is even clearer.

The culture of GSM there, is exactly that - a popular culture. There is a fashion line of neck straps and GSM accessories, a ringtone line of *chalga* - the local pop-folk country genre, and most of all, there is a communication culture of SMS messaging. Because it is more affordable, people *SMS* each other rather than *speak* on the phone, and yet the constant ringing on the street, on the bus, in the restaurants in Bulgaria is every bit as pervasive as it is in North America.

³ Statistics Canada. "Access to the information highway: the sequel" <<http://www.statcan.ca/cgi-in/downpub/listpub.cgi?catno=63F0002XIB1997013>>

Cell Phones and Social Status

Because of its relationship with commuting and business interactions, as well as the heavy business-related, male-dominated legacy of the telephone in its first half-century (Katz), it is not hard to imagine the social status of the first mobile phones. In describing the early telephone era, Sydney Aronson suggests that the “possession of a telephone may have served both to define and enhance the social status of individuals” (p.304). I would extrapolate this statement both to the possession of mobile phones in the beginning of 1990s, and all the way to present times when the competition is not just about having a cell phone, but having the latest and most sophisticated features.

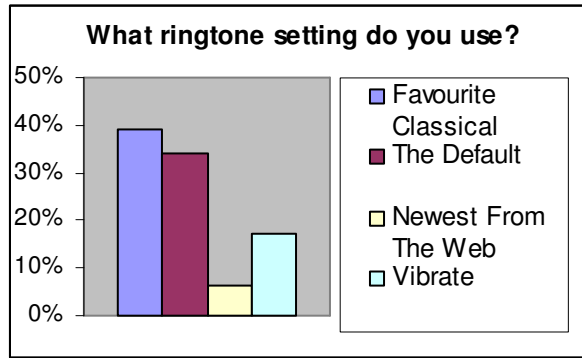
This unveils an aspect of cell phone ownership that has to do with technology more as a fashion statement rather than a necessity. The concept of ‘mobile,’ materialized in phones and computers, has gained a folklore value of success, youth and freedom of movement. As well, like any new technology, the cell phone comes charged with a prestige value, symbolizing wealth, modernity and cutting-edge. The rise of consumerism and individualism in the 21st century shamelessly place the emphasis on its entertainment value rather than its functionality⁴.

R-R-R-R-R-Ringtone Art

Among various multimedia cell phone features, such as web access, graphics, logos, games, digital cameras and such, ringtone art is proving to be one of the million-dollar blockbusters of the telecommunications industry. With hundreds of customizable ringtones to download from the web, virtually all popular music gets coded into ringtones as soon as it comes out. There is not much an artist can do if they don’t want their music to be compressed into cell phone ringing.

Classical composers are especially helpless with this endeavour so there is a proliferation of sonatas, fugues and symphonies around, crammed into three bars of binary code. Indeed, as my web study suggests, 40% use a favourite classical tune as a ringtone. And even though over 30% admit they use the default setting on their phone, the majority take quite a bit of time and consideration in choosing their ringtone. Once again, this points to the sensationalist and prestige-related value of cell phones as cultural object.

⁴ See <http://www.bellpixel.com/Fun_and_Downloads/RingTone.aspx>



However, if last year EMI sued YourMobile.com for violation of copyright of 300 songs, this year Nokia has signed a contract with EMI to offer tunes on its site. This enormous market has sprung to life a few private ringtone businesses such as the website of Martin Plante who is one of the first to use the title 'ringtone artist'⁵.

Just to illustrate how far this artistry goes, there are many ways to personalize one's cell phone - by using a *voice ringer* (a vocal message announcing each call), assigning different ringtones to different callers or composing one's own melody using an online sound editor (Lee). In qualitative terms, however, there are basically two types of ringtones - binary and polyphonic. Binary ringers are the well known and well resented narrow-bandwidth simple-tone ones. Polyphonic ringtones, however, can play up to 29 synthesized instruments and 12 percussion tracks simultaneously in high-quality SP-MIDI⁶. They can sound like a little pocket orchestra!

Even though they are a still a novelty in North America, these rich-tone ringers are slowly but surely covering their share of the market *and* of the acoustic space. It is hard to predict how that would affect people's general perception, considering the significant amount of frustration with ringing cell phones at present. It is noteworthy that cell phone ringing ranks higher in annoyance levels than any other sound in the shared acoustic environment⁷. In my web survey, I specifically probed for a written account of a time when cell phones have been particularly disturbing and the results show clearly that almost everyone has a passionate story to tell.

Yet, the question remains - would the proliferation of polyphonic ringtones create an environment of acceptance or are they just a passing fad. When asked directly if they find the new rich-tone sounds less annoying, 46% of my web respondents said ringtones are all the same to them. Only one person admitted they like polyphonic ringtones better. I

⁵ Listen to many examples at <http://cellphones.about.com/library/bl_martin.htm>

⁶ Nokia Site <<http://www.nokia.ca/english/ringtones.asp>>

⁷ See my survey from CMNS 359

have to admit, I do not find them nearly as annoying as the low-bandwidth ones, however, in a small shared space, they still are someone else's fashion statement intruding into my acoustic world.

Cell Phones and Regulation

Obviously, cell phones and their constant ringing are a real and legitimate concern when it comes to preserving the status quo of shared acoustic spaces - streets, public transport, restaurants, hospitals and other private areas. This has raised the question of regulation of cell phones - is it possible and should it be done. I posed this question in my web survey, and an overwhelming 78% indicated cell phones *should* be regulated in certain situations or places such as hospitals, when driving and so on.

On a different note, there is another industry connected with cell phone ringing which is growing too - the silencers and jamming devices business. And while in the US there has long been a total ban on using any kind of silencers, in Canada, the question of restricting cellular broadcast in certain times or places was recently posed for discussion. Here too, rather than cell phone companies lobbying against this proposal, it was the silencer industry lobbying for it (Walker, p.17).

Cell Phones In our Soundscape

In 1984, in trying to understand the social role of the telephone, Gerry Mitchell states, "The event of a ringing telephone is an intrusion into personal privacy and individual predictability" (p. 251). Now, his statement refers to line telephones intruding in a private home. Cell phones, on the other hand, are individually owned but their intrusiveness is not restricted to the individual - it affects, negatively or positively, everyone around it. Naturally, with the penetration rate of cell phones rising exponentially for the last ten years a large degree of habituation has settled in to compensate for this intrusion in individual predictability. At the same time, because cell phones are cultural objects, their ringing represents not simply a communication activity, but a competition for social status and prestige. This explains why cell phone ringing is particularly resented compared to other sonic devices like PA systems and moozak, which also permeate our acoustic spectrum.

Much Has Changed

Indeed, as I have shown in this paper, since the invention of the telephone, its cultural practices, social role and communication patterns have changed dramatically. Telephone automation, voice mail, mobile phones and text messaging have shifted interpersonal interaction from person-to-person to technology-facilitated message transmission. A complex system of etiquette and social norms has also evolved with it. And if in the dawn of telephones, it was all about consideration, sharing a line, not calling at certain times and keeping the telephone experience private, today, the opposite applies - line telephones are simply voice mail repository, mobile phones are anything but private, and consideration in shared public spaces is an issue that is overdue for an open public discourse.

These changes have to do with many socio-economic and cultural factors, but in particular, with the introduction and popularity of mobile phones. Mobility in general has become a synonym for success, fashion and prestige. Under the conditions of commercialism and globalization, cell phone popular culture has concentrated around audio-visual features such as graphics and ringtones.

Newer and more original polyphonic ringtones are composed and sold every day. Inevitably, this has an effect on our natural soundscape. A recent study from Britain shows that a number of city birds have started sampling ringtone tunes for their repertoire (Swanson, p.17). At the same time, the British library of Sound Archive wildlife collection has sold its audio to a cell phone company and now various animal calls are materialized in ringtones (Wagstaff). What would be next? A cell phone ringing like a wild Dodo and a starling answering with the tune of *Ooops I did it again?*

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