Media on the move: personalized media and the transformation of publicness

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Abstract

This article focuses on mobile phone uses and is premised on two seminal trends in recent media culture, namely media convergence and media mobility. As for convergence, the technological digitization of all media and telecommunication technologies imply increased possibilities of interplay between media forms of communication that turn people into media users and possible producers. As for media mobility, the development of ever-smaller media gadgets serves to integrate media and ICT uses as inconspicuous elements of people’s everyday actions and interactions in public as well as private spaces. The combined development of mobile and ubiquitous media technologies signals a reorientation of peoples’ appropriation of mediated time and space as they develop more personalized and interactive forms of communication, such as SMS, MMS, chat and gameworld interventions - not to mention the combination of communication and computing capabilities in the latest generation of mobile devices.

The gameboy, the discman, the mobile phone, the PDA, the MP3 player - since the 1980s portable, personalized and interactive media have signalled a transformation in relations between people and media. This has been from stability to mobility, from a situation in which the use of media devices was restricted to a location and to a time to a situation in which media objects may accompany individual users across shifting settings and times of the day. Thus the increased individualization and mobility of contemporary media culture invites conceptual reconsiderations of the time, spaces and social relations within which media practices develop and become institutionalized. And the technological fusion of computing and mediated communication invites similar reconsiderations of the interactive forms and communicative functions that mobile devices help facilitate, hamper and contest. How do people lay claim to public and private spaces when using mobile media technologies? Do the nearly ubiquitous presence of mobiles in many countries help weaken chronological time or, conversely, reinforce it? Do the portable and personalized media serve to challenge notions of media audiences, as these are traditionally constituted through the uses of newspapers and film, radio and television? Can we speak of mobile publics? What communicative forms and functions are enhanced through interactive, mobile media and how do these relate to prevalent genres within the traditional mass media? These are the main questions that I will attempt to answer in the following.

My empirical focus is on mobile phones, which on a global scale are

Keywords

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the most widely used of the mobile media. They are also useful objects of study if we want to consider the complexities of contemporary media culture, which is increasingly characterized by technological convergence, individualized interactivity and mobility. Mobiles are at once stand-alone technologies and part of an interlaced media ensemble: phone numbers used for downloading ring-tones and logos are found in magazines; pictures from mobiles are put on the Internet; sms is applied by TV broadcasters in their invocation of audiences. Mms icons draw on brands and star images known from other media. The combination of communication and computing in the most advanced devices lead people in the industry to seek for new names such as wireless devices, handsets and handhelds to cover the diversity of services and functions. I shall retain the term mobile phones since it is the common term used in most countries and signals a key function of use.

Like most other portable and interactive media technologies, mobile phones in general and sms in particular were first widely taken up by young people and older children in post-industrialized societies where mobile phones are both a symptom of and a solution to the demands made on spatial flexibility, temporal coordination and personal identity performance. Since these groups are pivotal to the socio-cultural transformations of the relations between audiences and media mentioned above, they constitute the focus of my empirical examples, which are mainly drawn from Europe.

Public Discourses

The wide adoption of mobile phones through the 1990s, not least by the younger generation, and the concomitant domestication of the technology has been accompanied by new public discourses. Foremost among these is a discourse of risk, which comes in several forms. One is the perceived health risk of the devices with cancer as a prime suspect, a suspicion that is being reinforced with the erection of new 3G masts in many European countries. In addition, the health discourse has intermittently focused on the physical damage to thumbs caused by excessive short-text messaging. Another risk discourse focuses on the material aspects of theft and exorbitant phone bills. Downloading and sending icons and pictures can be quite costly and the expense is not stated up front. Less tangible, but equally pervasive in the risk discourses, is the alleged danger text-messaging poses to the print literacy of the young ‘thumb tribes’. With its 160 characters, it invites unorthodox forms of spelling that are clearly at odds with the proficiencies taught at school and hence judged deficient by educational standards.

While public discourses lay claim to negative effects of mobile phones, the commercial discourse through the 1990s has been concerned with promoting more optimistic views. When the technology was still a novelty, its safety aspects were stressed: if you need help, a mobile at hand means it is only a call away. Parents could keep track of the whereabouts of their teenage children at night and monitor daily coordination of family life. Today, when the technology has become a taken-for-granted tool in many
parts of the world, the discourse of connectivity and creativity, flexibility and fun has pre-eminence as is seen on operators’ and content providers’ homepages. For instance, ‘Motorola - intelligence everywhere’ (Motorola) and ‘Nokia - connecting people’ (Nokia).

A primarily negative public discourse vis-a-vis a primarily positive commercial discourse mirrors a predominant pattern when new media technologies are introduced (Jensen 1990; Drotner 1999). The new gadgets become simple seismographs of complex socio-cultural problematics and they offer welcome projection screens for scenarios of the future. Since the younger generation is among the early adopters, these dichotomies play into established discourses on childhood, discourses that since the eighteenth century have been characterized by an opposition between protection and autonomy (Gillis 1974; James et al. 1998). The more personalized and portable media technologies such as the mobile phone serve to radicalize these well-known positions, since the phones are associated with individual ownership and personal priority of use and since their handiness make them inconspicuous yet effective means of social coordination and interaction beyond the confines of the home and the control of adults.

The discursive hinterland
Still, the public and commercial discourses on mobile phones are not only about the material objects of communication. Crucially, they centre on the substance and form of communication itself and the contexts of its use. Private conversations in what are considered public spaces like streets, shopping malls and markets; public performances (such as voting for a candidate in Big Brother) conducted in the privacy of the home; collective short text-messaging as part of community campaigns - these are all examples of ways in which the mediated interactions through mobile phones serve to question received notions of what is considered public and private space, what it takes to be part of an audience versus part of a public, what is considered intimate talk and public speech.

These notions are rooted in the idealist Enlightenment tradition that Jürgen Habermas takes as his historical point of departure and in the normative ideal in his influential theorizings on mediated communication in modernity (Habermas 1962/1989). According to this ideal, the public sphere is a partly mediated sphere of rational communication and social regulation. Here, publics form and are sustained through their communicative practices that aim at reaching consensual action and intervention. Matters from the private sphere of home and work can be debated as long as the debate is kept on a general level. These private matters concern domestic issues of the home, which Habermas terms the intimate sphere, and they concern economic issues of production such as labour disputes, safety conditions and investments.

The Habermasian concept of the public sphere would suggest that popular discourses on the introduction of mobile phones centrally concern the challenges mobile communication poses to received notions of what constitutes ‘proper’ communicative issues in different areas of society, just as the discussions lay claim to shifting boundaries between audiences and

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publics. When the central communicative devices through which publics are constituted and maintained can no longer be relegated to particular physical or imagined settings, when communicators themselves are on the move, then the received notions of media and mediators are played out in new ways and our analytical concepts are called into question.

In seeking to understand these reconfigurations, we may draw on the definition of the public sphere put forward by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995). According to this definition, the public sphere is a continuous social process, mainly performed through the media, whose central function is to offer a reflexive perspective on the system. Hence it signals a reduction in the complexity of modern society for its members, a signal that serves to ease individual conduct and social continuity. Luhmann, unlike Habermas, has no normative ideal of reaching consensus or facilitating joint social action. Rather, his systems theory harbours a sceptical positivism whose main objective is a continuation of the system, irrespective of its character.

In the case of mobile phones, we may further contextualize their social ramifications by drawing on recent theories of modernity and of individualization. The complexity and differentiation of most societies and their increasing interconnectedness necessitate flexible coordination of actions - and hence continuous communication. Mobile phone communication allows, and demands, people to be always available; it facilitates ad hoc communication and coordination as part of the flow of daily activities; and it allows for readjustments to and comments on social action. All this seems to reduce the complexity of social organization. But at the same time, mobile communication serves to widen people’s range of possible contacts and do so at all times and in all places, a process that in itself tends to increase rather than reduce complexity (Rasmussen 2000).

In modernity the handling of complexity is increasingly an individual affair. Individualization may be defined as a socio-cultural process whereby social interdependence is played out as individual transactions, a paradox that is often lost in popular discussions on the ‘me generation’ and similar normative discourses (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The flexibility, portability and communicative ease of mobile phones make them prime means of handling what Anthony Giddens calls ‘the reflexive monitoring of daily life’ (Giddens 1991). Late childhood and youth in many ways condense the claims made to individualization since identity work is at the fore in all areas of life - school, family, peers and for a good many also work. Hence, it is no wonder that the younger generation constitutes the early adopters of mobile communication in most parts of the world.

Permeable spaces
The portability of the mobile phone is its crucial feature. This means the spatial reconfigurations of mediated communication are at the core of its social functions. Landlines connect places with places, and so when people call a fixed phone, they call a particular place - other people (or devices like answering machines) in that place may stand in for the recipient of the call (Geser 2002). Mobile phones make direct connections between
individuals or, in the advanced versions, between individuals and satellites or Internet nodes (and then on to one or many recipients). They can go almost anywhere their users go; they traverse spatial boundaries and so they serve to diminish the concreteness of place in favour of the concreteness of the communicators. This, of course, is why a standard remark of a mobile conversation is about location: ‘Where are you?’ or ‘I am now on the bus’. Unlike landline calls, mobile communication does not assume place; it has to be confirmed, legitimated and explained - which again requires more text, talk or visual demonstration.

The portability of mobiles serves to make spatial boundaries more permeable and to increase the importance put on connectivity itself more than upon its spatial context. Particularly with the younger generation, mobile interaction will often be a social affair including more people at either end and so there will be interplay between the physical and the virtual audience. A clear example of this interplay is children riding on a school bus and having mobile conversations between the front- and back-seat kids. From an adult point of view such conversation is at best a waste of money but, as is evident for any witness to such an incident, for the participants it is precisely this playful connectivity between place and space, between physically and virtually located audiencing, that makes calling relevant and fun - passing the handset around, listening to sniggering on the phone, looking towards the other end of the bus.

Mobile, mediated practices constitute communicative spaces that cross the domains of public, semi-public and private locales and their respective normative barriers. In public spaces, the normative clashes resulting from these crossings are less regulated than is the case in semi-public spaces such as restaurants and classrooms (Ling 1997, 2000; Licoppe & Heurtin 2002). Overhearing a private conversation in a public space may cause personal curiosity or irritation but rarely collective reaction. In semi-public spaces, such reaction can be, and often is, institutionally guaranteed. In private places such as the home or the job, mobiles supplement landlines with fewer challenges of spatial boundaries as a result. Here, clashes are primarily caused by the individualized nature of mobile communication with mobile calls being reserved for personal calls that, moreover, signal an ‘ultra privacy’ to other members of the private household who may want to monitor the degrees of privacy (Drotner 2001).

Flexible time
Mobile communication can be synchronous (conversation), asynchronous (sms, mms, e-mail, voicemail) and both (web chat, Internet) - and it can be round-the-clock. These temporal possibilities are more diverse than those found in landline telephony and in mass communication. Mobiles facilitate ad hoc mediated communication, which is also reciprocal. Social arrangements can be coordinated, modified and changed literally as people go along. Mobile communication, too, operates as an anchoring of chronological time but not as fixed points of demarcation. It is a provisional handling of time that aligns mobile communication with a sense of temporal ease and fun rather than the fixities and duties of sequential time management - one may always make a new call, send another icon along.
These potential contradictions make the temporal aspects of communication more noticeable for mobile users than tends to be the case with broadcast audiences. In that respect, mobile and Internet interactions are similar, the main difference being that mobile communication combines temporal flexibility and fluidity with a set of permeable spatial qualities.

**Affirmation of social roles**

The most noticeable aspect of mobile phones, and certainly the one drawing most immediate attention, is its impact on social interaction, not least in public and semi-public spaces. In both formal and informal settings, mobile communication adds an extra dimension to interpersonal communicative practices: place-based activities and conversations are interspersed by space-based mobile communication and this creates an often intricate monitoring of roles, both for speakers and listeners, particularly in the case of mobile conversation (sms is silent and tends to be more unobtrusive).

When mobile talk is undertaken amongst anonymous others, the speaker negotiates a private, virtual role and a public, physically located role, while most listeners find various ways of displaying what Erving Goffman calls ‘civil inattention’ (Goffman 1963:85). Unlike calls to particular places via landlines, mobile callers cannot anticipate the situated role of the recipient and hence virtual role-regulation is often part of the opening of conversation, adding to the role-monitoring between social roles. These processes are particularly evident when there is a marked gap between roles undertaken in the social and virtual spheres - one may think of mobiles ringing during a classical concert or a conference, situations that often cause embarrassment both on the part of recipients and listeners (Ling 2001). Still, explicit, interpersonal regulation is rare in anonymous and non-institutional frameworks, although general rules of conduct may be imposed in institutional settings such as airports, cinemas and schools.

From a sociological perspective, we may say that mobile phone uses serve to complicate what Erving Goffman calls the ‘face work’ necessary in modern social life. Unlike landline conversations, mobiles do not mediate between a known ‘backstage’ (the location of speakers) and ‘front stage’ (the virtual space of conversation) (Goffman 1971). Rather, they require negotiations of various front stage performances (Ling 1997) - roles cannot be assumed, they have to be affirmed. Hence these negotiations tend to highlight the existence, even the necessity, of roles and face work. Not least with young people, the concepts of Goffman help illustrate how mobile phone uses both afford and affirm a reflexive self-monitoring that offsets the playful and performative aspects, which the uses also incur.

**Adaptable audiencing**

In terms of social relations, the concept of the audience encompasses the relations between producers and receivers mediated through various textual modes. Thus mediated interpretive practices are at the core of what constitutes an audience. But these practices are differently contextualized
both in institutional and interpersonal terms and they give rise to different forms of interaction between producers and receivers.

Unlike broadcast communication, the institutional framework of mobile communication is virtually invisible during use; speaking or texting seems institutionally unmediated and hence interaction is all. Moreover, interaction is transient, it is always to be interrupted or continued and it cannot ‘fall back’ on institutional continuities of production. It has to be individually confirmed, continued or rejected; and its substance and form can be personally shaped and modified. Unlike broadcast audiences, mobile users are performers investing their energies in more transient media practices whose communicative rules they seem in a position to influence. Does this make them a non-audience?

It certainly makes them a different type of audience than broadcast audiences. If we retain the basic definition given above, that is, that mediated interpretive practices are at the core of what constitutes an audience, then mobile communicators are audiences: conversation as well as texting, image production and reception involve contextualized interpretations of sign systems. But broadcast and mobile audiences are positioned very differently in terms of spatio-temporal and institutional relations, as we have seen. Spatial permeability, temporal flexibility and institutional invisibility all serve to foreground the procedural and dynamic nature of signification, so ‘audiencing’ may be an apt term to denote what is going on in mobile communication.

Mobile conversations, being personalized, synchronous dialogues, highlight the performative aspects of audiencing. Moreover, in communicative terms, if not necessarily in social terms, they display the horizontal positioning of the speakers, unlike the more hierarchical positioning of broadcast audiences vis-à-vis the producer. This horizontal positioning serves to strengthen what the Italian ICT researcher Leopoldina Fortunati calls a ‘nomadic intimacy’ between equals irrespective of location (peers, family, friends) (Fortunati, quoted in Geser 2002). So mobile calls will often deepen established bonds, at times to the exclusion of strangers. The extension of private space into public space has made researchers argue that callers ‘colonize a part of the public sphere [sic] and reduce it slightly by their unwillingness to participate’ (Ling 2001:16, 23). Still, such conclusions underestimate the socio-cultural varieties of mobile audiencing.

For the conflictual practices in negotiating public and private space are minimized when conversation is a more collective affair, as is often the case with children and young people who routinely interlace social and virtual interactions. As we noted, mobile communication both enables and enforces self-reflexive monitoring of various front stage performances and this monitoring is intensified with users’ oscillation between social and virtual practices. Here, intimate discourses are generated within collective and self-reflexive communicative processes that afford a self-consciousness of audiencing, a possibility of sharing and arguing about private issues, which may attain aspects of public performances and publicness, as will be discussed below.
Portable publics
The proliferation and domestication of mobile communication through the 1990s has been instrumental in changing the conditions of group formation on interpersonal as well as on macro levels. In the sprawling urban centres, young people coordinate their daily, and particularly, nightly activities and interests through their mobiles. The devices not only accompany the male street cultures that young men, particularly working class, have traditionally shaped and shown. They also act as transformative agents of these cultures by affording a new sense of publicness: the users are at once in public and a (potential) public, they claim public settings while forming communicative networks on issues and interests that they may relate to other potential publics. While these networks are transient, they are nevertheless dialogic and self-defined, thus opening spaces of performative and playful reflection and deliberation.

Particularly for young women, this new sense of dual publicness seems of significance. Whether warranted or not, many female informants stress that their mobile increases their sense of security in public places and hence the mobiles serve as enabling tools for young women to not only claim the night but to claim public places as spaces of personal affinity and autonomy. But does this make them a public, even a potential one, as indicated above? The answer crucially depends on our position in addressing the contested discourses on who publics are, as well as when and where they may be located. As is evident from the above, mobile communication, by its cutting across familiar oppositions, facilitates new sets of questions, asking also how publics may be formed and transformed.

To the extent that mobile communication advances a sense of belonging to public settings, a sense of being able to ‘do’ public communicative performances, also on private matters, it serves as an important lever of what social scientists define as civil society (for example, Lister 1997, Janoski 1998). The Swedish media researcher Peter Dahlgren, drawing on that tradition, has developed the conceptual dimension of civil society, a development that is particularly helpful in seeking to define the new constellations between audiences and publics brought about by contemporary media culture (Dahlgren 1995, 2003). From his conceptual perspective, Dahlgren focuses on what he terms ‘civic cultures’, that is, ‘how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development’ (Dahlgren 2003:3).

Dahlgren’s conceptual take allows us to begin to ask how publics and audiences are resourced. What are the socio-cultural conditions by which social agency is achieved, practised and opposed? In which ways do media (old and new) operate in relation to those processes? Answers do not focus upon the location of civic cultures as spatial categories - for example, in relation to the familiar distinction of Habermas between private and public spheres. Rather the answers focus on locating civic cultures as communicative practices that people shape across different settings and textual repertoires.

In tandem with the increasing importance played by mediated communication for social regulation, the formation of ‘grand’ publics diminish or are accompanied by the formation of what we call portable publics whose
composition is more flexible than traditional publics, since they may change from issue to issue. The transient nature of the portable publics also makes them more permeable with ‘nomadic’ audiences. Since most people in networked societies variously occupy both positions, the important division is perhaps not so much between audiences and publics but between groups online and offline. This development, in turn, adds to the social pressure put on traditional public spheres since their existence cannot be taken for granted but has to be legitimated in action.

Interactive expressiveness

So far our analysis of mobiles has focused on a user-centred perspective on mediated communication. But what do people talk about? Which types of print, visual and mixed messages circulate? These questions concern the meaning-making substance and form of mobile communication and they focus on the media perspective on communication. Naturally, this perspective is crucial to a socio-cultural understanding of media - if mediated meaning-making were irrelevant to people, why would they use media in the first place? So, a joint user and media, social and textual, perspective facilitates more nuanced studies (Drotner 2000).

While this joint perspective is a demanding task in any media study, it is even more daunting in analyses of interactive media such as the web, e-mail, gameboys and mobile phones. With these technologies, the text, always an elusive and contested entity, is apparent only at the moments of interaction and in many cases it may be modified and deleted. Let us therefore start with a functional, not a textual, typology of mobile communication following Roman Jakobson’s classic scheme (Jakobson 1960/1985). At one extreme is the short message conveying the caller’s wish for the recipient to perform some sort of action. Such messages serve a conative function. At the other extreme there are messages whose substance is relatively unimportant but which operate as signs of connectivity. These messages serve a phatic function and are very common in mobile communication, particularly with young people and women (Drotner 2001; Geser 2002).

The phatic function of connectivity demonstrates perhaps the greatest discrepancy between the evaluations made by users and non-users and by adults and kids. Adults and non-users tend to judge mobile communication in terms of its effectiveness, economy and substance - all of which call for brevity and immediate relevance. Conversely, users evaluate mobile communication in terms of its affect, performativity and form. For example, in a qualitative study on children’s media uses, a parent expressed near incomprehension of his daughter, aged nine, who would sms her best friend next door every morning ten minutes before meeting her to go to school (Drotner 2001). Thus the phatic function serves to push the communicative focus of mobile interaction from substance to process, from what is being communicated to that communication takes place at all. The dispersion of audiences and publics across a variety of sites and sources of expression may add to this shift of focus in that commonality has to be continuously articulated and affirmed.

Receiving and responding to standard icons, text messages and calls
demand knowledge of communicative variations in order to correctly decode the various forms and act appropriately. One must know when to decline a response, answer an sms with an sms or upgrade the intensity of communication and make a call. Thus the social monitorings of mobile communication are simultaneously textual monitorings.

If radio and particularly television have rightly been seen as windows to the world opened from within the living room (Meyrowitz 1985) and if the recent trends of reality formats on television and the Internet may be seen as mediations between social and virtual intimacies (Mehl 1996; Dovey 2000), then the extensive take up of mobile phones in many ways widens the range of intimate, mediated interactions across social and virtual spaces and they do so around the clock. This transformation of public space into a ‘common living room’ (Kopomaa 2000) is routinely deplored as an intrusion of the trivial and mundane into the loftier, more abstract realms of publicness, both in its spatial and social sense. Alternatively, the transformation is hailed as a victory of innovation and individual activism undermining old-fashioned institutions and hierarchical structures. These dichotomous discourses tend to underestimate the complexities involved in practising the social and textual ‘mobilization’ of mediated communication. These practices involve tentative transformations of our understandings of both audiences and publics, as we have seen.

Media on the move?
The socio-cultural discourses on and appropriations of mobile media flag up a socio-cultural scenario, familiar to earlier media developments, in which some of the important stakes are the power over the rights to access and use, the universality of information and entertainment and the legal status of intellectual property rights. While mobile technologies do not change the stakes in this scenario of the immediate future, at least they add yet another medium through which audiences and performers, publics and producers may lay claim to these stakes. Perhaps their greatest potential lies in the ways in which they extend our imagination of what it takes to perform audiencing, of which issues can be shared through mediation, to partake in shifting the boundaries between public and private domains, between the modes of talk and the means of action.

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