

## Managing Banality in Mobile Multimedia\*

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### **Abstract**

One development line of mobile phones is fast filling the market with digital cameras, sound features, and gaming options. For instance, at the end of 2004, approximately 50% of mobile phones sold in Europe will have an in-built camera. How is this technology used? How does it change the way we relate to mobile telephony? This paper studies first empirical evidence of how mobile multimedia is used to analyze these questions. The argument is based on an interactionist understanding of mobile multimedia. It follows the conversation analyst Harvey Sacks's observations of storytelling in ordinary life. The data has been gathered in Helsinki, Finland, in 1999-2003. They focus on (1) how mobile phones are used in sending and receiving digital images, and on (2) MMS (multimedia messaging service). The analysis suggests that mobile multimedia is primarily used for observing and reporting mundane things: people fit it into their ordinary activities, using it mostly for mutual entertainment, far less often for instrumental or artistic purposes. They also respond to these reports with other mundane things. Mobile multimedia will enrich users' lives in many ways in the future, but scarcely makes a significant contribution to politics or other social structures at large.

### **Key words**

Mobile multimedia messaging – MMS – banality – social interaction

### **Statistics**

7/29/2004 3:48: wrds 6824, chrns 43 072 (with spaces)

And when we start considering stories, at least one tack we can take is to treat the overwhelming banality of the stories we encounter... as not so much something that, e.g. allows for statistical analysis of variation, or that makes them therefore uninteresting to study, but as a specific features which turns on a kind of attitude; say, an attitude of working at being usual, which is perhaps central to the way our world is organized. (Sacks 1994, II: 220-221).

### ***Introduction***

Mobile multimedia is on its way to the marketplace. One development line of mobile phones is fast filling the market with digital cameras, sound features, and gaming options. For instance, at the end of 2004, approximately 50% of mobile phones sold in Europe will have an in-built camera. A research consultancy, Strategy Analytics, estimated that already in the first six months of 2003, the worldwide sell of mobile phones with a camera was 25 million units. The biggest companies are NEC and Panasonic, with 15% of markets each, and Nokia, with 14%. This is more than the sale of digital cameras during the same period. Camera phones are fast becoming the dominant technology of digital imaging (Startel Oct. 6, 2003). The largest digital camera manufacturer in the world in 2003 was Nokia rather than Sony or Canon.

For a sociologist, the question is how is this technology used? How does it change the way we relate to mobile telephony? My answer is preliminary, and is built in two steps, first by looking at what I call *Apparatgeist* (Katz and Aakhus 2002)

*scenarios*, and then by contrasting these to empirical data, analyzed from a situated perspective using data from several studies conducted in Helsinki, Finland. Unlike mobile telephony, which tends to detach people from their environment, mobile multimedia “reterritorializes” experience (Scifo 2004; Koskinen 2004b). Essentially, it is a new technology for perception: what aspects of the surroundings people observe and report with it, and what kinds of social issues are involved in this activity?

### ***Evidence on Mobile Multimedia and the Apparatgeist Scenarios***

The first empirical evidence on how mobile multimedia is used is from studies conducted in Helsinki, Finland. Koskinen with his colleagues (Koskinen et al. 2002) first showed that most of the methods people use to construct messages are mundane in character. For example, these methods consist of postcards, short stories, and responses to these. Most messages are sent to friends and acquaintances rather than to just anyone. In topical terms, mobile multimedia develops primarily in the footsteps of snapshot photography. Also, text rather than images are in a key role in multimedia messaging. In follow-up studies, these results have been confirmed, although the role of responses has been highlighted even more (Battarbee and Koskinen 2004a; Koskinen 2004a).

The sociologist Barbara Scifo conducted field work in Milan at two stages, first in June-July 2003, a year after MMS services were available from the main Italian providers, and then in September-October 2003, following the increase in sales for camera phones and in the use of the new devices. She learned that mobile multimedia roots experience back in physical and social surroundings rather than detach it from space like mobile telephony more generally. Multimedia messaging is

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closely and almost exclusively linked to one's network of strong relationships, and it is primarily used to nourish sentimental bonds. With MMS, people give others an access to places as well as individual and social situation and emotions. They share objects and people, one's private life (like objects, relatives, and haunted places), and one's social network. Also, mobile multimedia provides an extension of one's experience and memory – with it, one's affective world is reportable in a visual and shareable form. The mobile archive is always within easy reach and ready for sharing. Phones also provide opportunities for play and entertainment: they are routinely shared and swapped. (Scifo 2004).

Ling and Julsrud (2004) studied MMS (multimedia messaging service) in small work groups with dense internal networks in Norway. Groups were mobile salespersons for a soft drink company, real estate salespersons and carpenters. Each group was given an access to MMS for 6 months. Ling and Julsrud learned that the main “genres” were documentation of work related objects, visualization of details and project status; snap shots (developing camaraderie); postcards and greetings; and chain messages (standardized messages, usually downloaded from websites). Soft drink sales persons used MMS most, followed by carpenters. These groups used MMS for all of the above mentioned purposes. Real estate sales persons used the technology only for postcards, greetings, and snapshotting. Carpenters also used MMS for “clarification”: taking and sending pictures of problems at work to get advice from colleagues.

This picture provides a strong contrast to early arguments of what virtual technologies are doing to us. For instance, in one of the earlier attempts to understand how networks change our lives, Turkle (1994) argued that networks might free people for identity explorations. There is little social control on the Internet, and it is

relatively easy to create fictional identities for exploring unexplored areas of the self there. Another argument strand sees virtual technologies in creative terms: with this technology, people can experience stories and art in their lives (Darley 2000; Murray 1999). The third argument relates mobile technology to policy participation and organizing political campaigns (Dányi and Sükösd 2003; for a contrary opinion, see Pertierra et al. 2002: 101-124). However, given first evidence on mobile multimedia, these *Apparatgeist* scenarios lead to overblown expectations of its future. Rather, photographing in mobile multimedia seems to follow the tradition of ordinary snapshot photography (see Chalfen 1987; Bourdieu et al. 1990; Daisuke and Ito 2003). The question, then, is what accounts for this overwhelming banality observed in early studies on mobile multimedia?

### ***The Mundane as a Problem***

“Hiptop” multimedia devices are integrated into a communication device built to support perpetual contact (Katz and Aakhus 2002). Their key feature is that they follow us everywhere, and thus render the less photographic and communication-worthy aspects of mundane life communicable. In contrast, using digital cameras typically requires planning: people think ahead what is important enough for photographing, and take a camera with them if they think they will see something interesting and memorable.

However, the mundane is a topic with a curious social dynamics. Pictures of all-too-familiar streetscapes, workplaces, homes, summer homes, and familiar people are banal and easily too boring to carry any meaningful interaction, especially if interaction is prolonged. Only a few topics – such as pictures of babies, pets, and

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sights from foreign cities – are inherently interesting as such, but they are not many, and boredom is lurking even with these topics. How many pictures of a baby or a dog can one send without making the exchange boring for the recipient?

In consequence, users have to solve a host of problems to use multimedia messaging. The key problem is how to make exchange interesting enough to be worth reporting. If one keeps sending uninteresting material, recipients lose interest and may get annoyed. Ultimately, they may even think that the sender is not just boring, but also somehow obsessed, having such nosy, curious and even macabre interests (compare to Bergmann 1993). The conversation analyst Harvey Sacks (1994, II: 215-221) once observed that storytellers routinely make their experiences normal instead of elaborating on juicy details even after catastrophic events. There are good interactional reasons to keep things normal. By “doing being ordinary,” people make sure that others know that they can be relied on.

So, there’s a business of being an “ordinary person,” and that business includes attending the world, yourself, others, objects, so as to see how it is that it’s a usual scene. And when offering what transpired, you present it in its usual “nothing much” fashion, with whatever variants of banal characterizations you might happen to use... Now there are enormous virtues to seeing the usual in a scene. It permits all kinds of routine ways of dealing with it... [When crossing a street] you do not, then, have to make an each-and-everytime decision whether or not you’ll be allowed the right of way. (Sacks 1994, II: 218-221).

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Banality is a problem for senders and recipients alike. The *senders* have to find ways to make their messages somehow meaningful. In most cases in ordinary life, the interest does not lie in the topic. Somehow, they have to find methods to arouse the interest of the recipient: they have to *make* drama out of the banalities of ordinary life (see Battarbee and Koskinen 2004a). The *recipients* also face problems. They have to inspect the message for its newsworthiness. If they find it interesting, their possible responses are typically designed to show appreciation. If they find it uninteresting, weird, or boring, they have to find a way to stop messaging without causing the sender to become embarrassed or to lose face (Gross and Stone 1964; Goffman 1967: 5-45). Insulting the sender might lead to problems in subsequent interaction and relationship.

The central premise of the analysis that follows is that sending and responding to messages is an orderly and methodic activity, as such available for analysts (see Sacks 1984). This paper follows the traces of these methods in users' activities. The thrust of the argument is deliberately interactionist, and as such, it tries to avoid both psychological categories and traditional sociological variables such as age, race, or socioeconomic status in an attempt to explain multimedia messaging.

### ***Data and Methods***

This paper is based on studies conducted in Helsinki, Finland, in 1999-2003. They focus on how mobile phones are used in sending and receiving MMS (multimedia messaging service). These studies were done with industrial designers Esko Kurvinen and Katja Battarbee, and several assistants.

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In *the Radiolinja MMS Study (Radiolinja)*, we selected three user groups from the Helsinki-based mobile operator Radiolinja's (now Elisa) technology and service pilot. The pilot took place in summer 2002, and lasted about 5 weeks. Each user was given a MMS phone (either Nokia 7650 with an integrated camera or SonyEricsson T68i with a plugin camera). Three mixed-gender groups with 7, 11, and 7 members were studied. Out of the Radiolinja pilot, we selected groups to take into account gender difference, terminal types, and the city-countryside axis. Exact numbers are confidential, but the following figures point the scale of messaging in the pilot. In all, users sent over 4000 messages during the pilot. Over 2000 were unique (the rest being duplicates in group messages, or recycled messages). These data were produced through the Radiolinja system automatically. As in *Mobile Image*, the service was free of charge.

For this paper, I have treated these data in the following fashion. From the vast mass of *Radiolinja* messages, I chose a subsample that consists of 543 messages, sent by the 12<sup>th</sup> group (with 7 members) during the third and fourth weeks, and by the 8<sup>th</sup> group (11 members) during the 4<sup>th</sup> week of the study. In analyzing data in detail, the first phase consisted of an unmotivated search for similarities and recurrent issues, and the second creating a series of hypotheses from data in group 12. This interpretation was treated as a working model, which was "tested" with data from group 8. Thus, the analysis proceeded in the spirit of analytic induction (see Seale 1999; Arminen 2004): if a previous model works in new data, the explanation is sufficient. If not, the model is changed until it accounts for all cases. This procedure creates an explanation that describes what is going in *these* data. It does not generalize to other data; local circumstances need to be attended to for such generalization.

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Participants knew that they were studied, and were informed about the ethical procedures used. In particular, I told them how data was produced, promised not to publish pictures without their consent, and promised to change details of images so that it would not be possible to identify them from publications. In addition, I have followed standard academic and legal practice and have changed all names and details that could identify people or places.

### ***Establishing the Relevancy of Messages***

To make the messages relevant for the recipient, senders use a set of “*interest arousers*” (see Sacks 1994, II: 226) to secure the recipients’ interest. Three main categories exist. First, events and objects in the message may be presented as newsworthy (see Terasaki 1976) as such by describing them as somehow extraordinary. Second, there are reports of humor; fun may justify sending the message. Third, although the thing reported might be normal, people can still make it worth reporting by presenting it as a sign of a more significant pattern, or by giving an account for why a trivial thing deserves to be reported anyway.

### Out of Ordinary Descriptions

Even though most mobile multimedia messages are about familiar scenes, this does not mean that they only deal with routines recipients know well. Mundane life offers surprises and out-of-ordinary things. Thus, even the most familiar things may be newsworthy. Sometimes, this is because they are out of the realm of ordinary.

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Thus, in one message Markku tells Mari about what had happened to him recently. An older lady had ruffled his hair without any apparent reason. He tells then about a similar previous case, and describes older ladies' interest to his hair in non-sexual terms as "fixations," thus hinting that something pathological is going on. Of course, he may be bragging about his hair here as well, although the appreciative gesture is done not by him, but by the ladies. However, it is important to note how Markku's description provides a justification for sending the message to Mari. Such incident is not typical to the normal course of affairs. Rather, it is an experience that may provide food for thought not just for Markku, but also for Mari. In fact, Mari responded later by noting that she would not know what she would do, should an older man ruffle her hair.

A related method to secure the recipient's attention is to introduce a *shock effect* to arouse an emotional response in the recipient. To be truly successful, a shock effect has to arouse disgust, horror, or fear. At minimum, it has to dramatize the sender's sense of shock vividly enough to be believable for the recipient. It is this feeling that justifies the message. If successful, such message may even call for a response – non-response would show indifference. For example, once Lisa sent an image of a few apparently rotten newspapers. As a conservation student, she was working on a house roughly 100 kilometers from Helsinki. In the course of her work, she found these newspapers and, as the message shows, underneath them, worms (Message 1).

Lisa makes several things to arouse the feeling of disgust in Mari. In addition to the picture of rotten papers, she describes them in terms of a sexually transmitted disease, which functions as an effective deterrent as such. Also, her description suggests that these were not the first disgusting findings in the restoration process, nor

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are they going to be the last ones. Furthermore, she uses culinary terminology that connects her message directly to Mari's bodily experience: the worms are "juicy," and she asks her whether Mari would like to "lick" the papers. All these descriptors may be designed to make Mari's experience as visceral as possible. In her response, she sent a picture of herself eating an ice cream bar, telling "Ehm... I think I'll stay here... Were they dead or alive?" If a shock display is designed to call for a frightened, horrified or disgusted response, this response does just that. It also recognizes a satirical element in Lisa's original: she *is* licking an ice cream bar in a sunny day, thus giving a visual interpretation of the notion of "licking" in Lisa's inquiry.

 <p>_034r12 12.7. 11:27</p>	<p>Would you like to lick these? The worst condyloma so far and underneath the stack, I found three juicy, white worms...</p>
<p><b>Message 1.</b></p>	

### Humor

People often delight each other with humor in mobile multimedia. The sender devises the message so that it will amuse the recipient. Either the recipient's expected reaction or the sender's original amusement is the justification for sending the message. Also, in humor and in games, there is an element of transgression. For a brief moment, people depicted in a humorous message do not follow the rules of

ordinary life, but live in a twisted world (see Goffman 1962: 17-81). This other-worldliness is worth reporting, even when it respects the normal order of things, keeping them unquestionable.

Thus, in one message Mari has explored the camera and managed to take a particularly funny self-portrait. In the portrait, she wears old-fashioned eyeglasses (she does not use glasses normally), and her cheeks are in such position that she has an Oriental look. In her opinion, she looks like a yogi or a spiritual adviser, which is what she communicates to Markku. He responded soon with a message in which he congratulated Mari for sending such a sunny picture, and provided evidence of his amusement by telling that he had laughed for several minutes after seeing the message. Also, he took a picture of himself drinking beer, telling Mari that he has to fill his spiritual emptiness that way (see Messages 9-11 below).

### Making Mundane Newsworthy

Events, situations, or human actions do not have to be extraordinary or funny to be tellable. Other methods can be used to justify a report of a “normal” occurrence. One way to do that is to point out some detail in the image as deserving attention, even though the scene as such is ordinary. Often, this detail may have a symptomatic value, suggesting that more is going on than one would naïvely believe. The detail is interpretable as an indication of a more patterned event or action. For example, dirt in a wrong place may prompt gossip about the neighbor’s uncleanness and lack of orderliness (see Bergmann 1993).

Thus, in one example (see Koskinen 2004a), there is a picture of four young women sitting in the back seat of a car. The text tells that the (self-claimed) “barbies”

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are in a taxi. The message is sent to Markku, who knew from previous exchange that the women were going to have a night out. The thing pointed out in the message is “Patsy’s” deep cleavage; in the context of having a night out, this detail has a sexual connotation. This is the interpretation done in subsequent messaging. First, Markku responded with a jocular plea to close her cleavage with “a safety pin or something.” Then Mari responded to him with an image of two kissing people and a message telling how things are “getting hot in the nightclub... Lisa is getting lucky.” In a subsequent message, Markku tells that “it is good if there is some action going on. And of course, Lisa’s cleavage draws men like a flypaper.” Lisa’s cleavage, then, is taken as a sign of sexual intentions. However, even more than that may be involved. The message is sent to Markku only. If Markku has romantic intentions concerning Lisa, the message becomes a part of a courting ritual, in which women are testing his humor by trying to make him jealous.

	Oh what a wonder and lovable scene. I know what many people think that nature photos are boring, but I can't but rejoice when beautiful things can be found even from Korso. Another thing: can you make animations and if you can, how?
<b>Message 2.</b>	

Finally, senders may send pictures they believe will be seen as uninteresting by *accounting for* why these messages are sent in the first place. For example, in one message a picture of a pond is accounted for with an excuse of being enthralled by the

beauty of the scene (Message 2). The significant detail is the place, Korso, which is a poorly reputed suburb near Helsinki. This fact in particular makes the beauty pronounced: in the middle of a suburb filled with large concrete apartment blocks, nature scene is all the more surprising.

### ***Turning Topics Down***

With methods described above, people can render practically anything as interesting enough to be reportable. The meaning does not lie in topics or objects, but in the way in which multimedia messages are devised. Typically, these devices are successful. With the Korso nature scenery notwithstanding, appreciative replies followed each message analyzed in this section.

Despite these measures used to secure the recipient's interest, banality remains a problem in interaction. Everything cannot be made interesting; some messages and items in them simply remain uninteresting enough not to solicit response. At worst, the message may embarrass the recipient and even threaten his face (see Gross and Stone 1964; Goffman 1967). Such messages may even lead to attempts to tone down the sender and reprimand him in some fashion. For example, although travel pictures are usually a safe bet (see Koskinen 2004a), people are held accountable for sending *interesting* travel photos. Markku once sent pictures of Helsinki, his hometown to recipients who also live in Helsinki. After several messages, Timo characterized him as a "helluva tourist," which ended the flow of pictures. Characterizing someone as a "tourist," even though he is in his hometown, suggests that he is exercising a "tourist gaze" – paying attention to just those boring details that are uninteresting for locals.

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Should Markku have continued his messaging after Timo's response, the messaging would have been seen as an attempt to tease or to annoy Timo. (Messages 3-6).

 <p>_084-88r12 16.7. 17:30</p>	<p>Text: (From Markku to 6 people)</p> <p><i>Greetings from korkeasaari zoo.</i></p> <p>(in italics in English in original)</p>
 <p>_097r12 17.7.16:38</p>	<p>Text: (From Markku to 6 people)</p> <p><i>Helsinki by sea. In the back, there is Suomenlinna.</i></p> <p>(in italics in English in original)</p>
 <p>_102r12 17.7. 16:45</p>	<p>Text: (From Timo to Markku)</p> <p>You're a helluva tourist...</p>
 <p>_104r12 17.7. 17_06</p>	<p>Text: (From Markku to Timo)</p> <p>Well I am a tourist in Helsinki...</p> <p>Here with cider...</p>
<p><b>Messages 3–6.</b></p>	

Another possible candidate for an intrinsically interesting category is the actions, moods, or words of people (especially babies). Again, if such messaging remains too banal, it may elicit requests to stop messaging (see Battarbee and Koskinen 2004a). Thus, just as there are no intrinsically trivial topics in multimedia messaging, there are no intrinsically interesting topics either. Interest is a relational

thing which depends on the how the sender's justification are understood and taken by the recipients.

The most typical method used for turning down a topic was teasing (see Drew 1987; Kurvinen 2003). In Message 5, the word "tourist," with its implications, shows that there is something laughable in Markku's previous activities. When Markku responds with a humorous message and stops the series, the episode is soon over. In another case, Mika sent a picture of a decoy duck used by hunters, noting that he has "seen a rare bird," and asking Markku to show the picture to Koivu, a common acquaintance. Less than 30 minutes later, Markku responded by sending a picture of a man's face (probably Koivu), with the text saying that he also has "seen a rare bird." What makes this message a tease is the choice of the picture. A man's face is not a rare occurrence. Also, he did not even try to find a bird for his response. The response is excessive and thus indirectly shows that the previous message was not so smart after all. However, there is still an element of humor involved (a man is presented as a duck), which turns the message into a tease. This is one of the reasons for the prevalence of teases in attempts to close topics: they make a strong signal for the recipient for not to continue the previous line of activity, while humor in them softens the rejection.

In one case, the procedure was considerably more complicated, extending over several messages. In Markku's "tourist" series, there was a picture of a young woman not known to Mari, who immediately asked who she was, and asked for a picture of her, "trading" a picture of her boyfriend for this picture. In response, Markku sent the picture but noted that he is suspicious of such "I trade you" deals. However, he did not close the episode here, but continued with several messages that softened the action. First, there was a polite question of who is the man in Mari's message. Then

he sent two pictures of his cats, introduced new topic (the cats' previous homes), and finally sent pictures of flowers and plants at his home before a good night wish. With this stepwise withdrawal, he steered the exchange away from an awkward topic, while simultaneously managing to make up his earlier, possibly rude cut-off.

Notice how these elimination messages are construed. They contain a whole lot of what can be called relational work (Schegloff 1986) that helps people to maintain their relationships regardless of these face-threatening actions (Goffman 1967). The key thing is that these methods are largely indirect: the rejection is never put in so many words. Instead, people employ teases and other indirect tactics to make sure their action is not blameworthy. If there ever was gossip about people who sent weird messages, these analyses were not shown to the recipient either.

### ***A Machinery for Banality***

There were only five instances of turning down topics in the subsample studied for this paper. Thus, a massively more typical interactional path is affirmative in nature. Two cases have to be distinguished. First, most multimedia messages are not construed to *require* a response as, say, questions are devised to elicit answers. Rather, they only *make responses possible*, but there are no elements that make recipients accountable for producing a response, or to account for the lack of response (see Koskinen and Kurvinen 2002). If this is the case, multimedia messaging consists of individual, disjointed messages that report the world as mundane.

Second, some messages do elicit responses. Perhaps surprisingly, these responses typically are deliberately ordinary as well. In a useful set of articles, Licoppe and Heurtin (2001), Harper (2004), and Taylor and Harper (2002) have

suggested that text messaging in particular can best be understood as a form of reciprocal gift exchange (see also Mauss 1980; Gouldner 1960; Berking 1999). A similar point about mobile multimedia is in Koskinen et al. (2002: Ch. 7). The basic argument is simple: when someone gives a gift, the recipient is supposed to reciprocate, typically with a more or less similar gift. In fact, there is a moral obligation to do so. Should one not counter, that would be noticeable as an ungrateful act.

In mobile multimedia, this principle works at least at two levels, the ritual and the topical. In the following *ritual* example, Susanna, a mother sends her “greetings” from a shopping mall with a picture of a baby to ten persons. In response, she receives a greeting from Ari (Messages 7-8). In functional terms, this exchange makes Susanna’s and Ari’s the relationship visible and renews it. Importantly, one feature in the exchange shows that the gesture of responding is more important than the exact content. Ari has no baby pictures at hand to respond to Susanna. The next best thing is a paint roller at home: it is something at hand, just as Zoewy is at Susanna’s hands. Here, it is the gesture that matters, not the content.

However, often reciprocity does take a content-oriented shape. If this is the case, we can talk about *topical reciprocity*. When someone gets a message and decides to respond to it, but is not specifically instructed to respond with a specific content, he searches for the thing to be sent using a simple procedure. He searches for an item that, in terms of its content, is like some element in the received message. Thus, holiday pictures are responded to with other holiday pictures. Facial expressions are responded to with facial expressions, and so on. Sometimes the response format is almost perfect, as in Messages 9-11. Here Markku informs three friends about his holiday that starts tomorrow with a self-portrait in which he is

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drinking beer. In this message, beer becomes almost a ritual sign of holiday mood (see also Koskinen et al. 2002: 47-48).

 <p>_006r08 24.7. 12:37 to 10 persons</p>	<p>Text: Greetings from East Centre. Br. Zoewy</p> <p>Audio, 24 sec.: The baby Zoewy tries to talk. Her mother and several other adults in the vicinity laugh. She starts to feed Zoewy.</p>
 <p>_027r08 24.7. 12:42</p>	<p>No text.</p> <p>Audio, 9 sec.: Greetings from the work camp in Mellunmäki. Happy shopping trip to East Centre. Bye!</p>
<p><b>Messages 7–8.</b></p>	

Markku gets two responses almost immediately. Both responses borrow the gesture from Markku's message almost perfectly. The only changes are in perspective and in the way in which the picture is laid down to the phone. This way Ari and Per show that they can make sense of Markku's gesture and what it stands for. In visual terms, these responses show a peculiar analysis of Markku's original image. When searching for a suitable picture for response, they start from Markku's message and restrict their search to that format and its elements: the stylized posture of upper torso, the position of beer bottle, and the concentrated facial expression. We can almost see their action here: after receiving a message from Markku, they go to the refrigerator,

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pick up a bottle of beer, open it, arrange someone to take a picture while they pose for the camera, and send their cheers to him with this picture. The only thing missing in this emotional tuning is the actual clinking of bottles to congratulate Markku.

(Compare to Koskinen and Kurvinen 2002: 122-123).

 <p>_02r12 11.7. 18:53</p>	<p>Text: (Markku to Per, Ari, Jan)</p> <p>And tomorrow starts my holiday!</p>
 <p>_22r12 11.7. 18:59</p>	<p>Text: (From Per to Markku)</p> <p>Welcome to the merry crowd, on holiday for the second day!</p>
 <p>_23r12 11.7.19:00</p>	<p>Text: (Ari to Markku)</p> <p>Yea, welcome to the holiday mood.</p>
<p><b>Messages 9-11.</b></p>	

Messaging is kept mundane by other processes as well. For example, what comes to “morally contaminated” topics (see Bergmann 1993), the young men in *Mobile Image* took photographs of practically every young woman they saw, and in text claimed that they had an intimate relationship with them, even though women in pictures were typically steady girlfriends. Here, mobile multimedia provided an environment in which a predatory male identity could be created and shared. However, several things kept such culture in check. In particular, there was an element of moral self-control involved: for instance, these men took pictures of

women in their twenties, but not younger than that. Other checks were abundant as well. In particular, there was an element of tact. For instance, in the interviews, Esa told that he chose not to take pictures of people's faces when they were suffering from hangover in the morning, or to capture particularly wild moments at parties (Koskinen et al. 2002: 82-84).

### ***Conclusions and Discussion***

This paper set out to explore why mobile multimedia supports ordinary, mundane activities in consumers' hands rather than is used for more significant usages. This observation is drawn from the first empirical studies on the uses of mobile multimedia (Koskinen et al. 2002; Scifo 2004; Ling and Julsrud 2004). These studies provide a useful contrast to cyberutopic literature that sees virtual technologies either as identity liberating technologies (Turkle 1991), or as a channel for artistic explorations (Darley 2000; Murray 1999). Also, it contrasts to arguments that see mobile technology in political terms as devices for political organizing (Dányi and Sükösd 2003; but see Pertierra et al. 2002).

There are good social reasons for such banal overtone. For a number of reasons, mobile multimedia comes to focus on mundane things. It is a technology that follows people practically everywhere, making new but typically ordinary places not just observable, but reportable alike. Furthermore, due to a series of social reasons, the use of multimedia devices focuses on ordinary things. People send messages of mundane things, justifying their messages somehow as relevant in text. Recipients may find it hard to turn down these messages without embarrassing the sender, no matter how trivial they may seem. In responding, recipients typically go for a similar

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type of content; if the original contents are more or less ordinary, so are the responses. Finally, a set of moral and social controls set limits to how far from ordinary messaging people can go.

In the spirit of the conversation analysts Harvey Sacks quoted in the beginning of this paper, the analysis has focused on interaction rather than tried to explain banality in terms of psychological categories or socio-economic structures. The tack has been to focus on order inherent in interaction. This order is seen as an on-going accomplishment (Garfinkel 1967), something that is constantly in the making rather than explained by societal values or structures. The corollary of this premise is that if people behave in orderly ways, these may be analyzable as invariances in terms of such structural attributes as gender, wealth, or age. However, to explain these regularities by social structural variables would miss the effect for the thing that needs to be explained.

This paper focuses only on how the mundane functions in interaction. There are other obvious explanations for banality in mobile multimedia as well. For example, for truly significant things in life, there exist other, more powerful communication and memory technologies. For example, weddings are documented with ordinary and digital cameras, video cameras, and diaries. For mobile multimedia, the remaining “niche” is mundane and banal. These are relevant considerations that ought to be kept in mind. However, they do not threaten the validity of the present analysis.

How about more “relevant” uses? The best evidence is from Ling and Julsrud (2004), who have studied three occupational groups, carpenters who used their multimedia devices for work, soft drink salespersons, who pictured interiors and piles of soft drinks, and real estate agents, who sent greetings and postcard-like messages.

The most interesting comparison can be made with the carpenters, who photographed details of work for later reference and for clarification. However, this is an institutional usage, embedded in a work tradition with specific interests and a specialized repertoire of tools, vocabularies, forms of reasoning and activities. However, ordinary interaction exhibits many practices that are like clarification. For example, Koskinen (2004a) analyzed person identification sequences in a set of MMS messages. They are designed to update the recipients' knowledge and to clarify their understanding of what is going on in the message. Though more elaborate and specialized for certain purposes, carpenters' usage may be a special case of this more encompassing usage.

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