

Face the Music: Mobile Multimedia in Social Context

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ABSTRACT

First studies have shown that mobile telephony in general is a “disturbing” technology and that people use several techniques to manage these disturbances. Mobile multimedia raises new issues because it is not based on interpersonal communication and it is typically noisy. In our data from a field trial on streaming video to mobile phones, a half of uses prompted significant social involvement. Avoidance, reparative processes and social action were evident as strategies to manage mobile multimedia. We use the notion of “face-work” (Goffman 1967) to explain the social context of the multimedialization of mobile telephony.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones and multimedia phones grab people away from their previous involvement, be it conversation, daydreaming or instruction in the classroom. Often these new lines of action disturb other people, distracting them from their previous lines of activity. In some institutional settings, mobile technology may even be forbidden for this reason. In less strict settings, people have to negotiate a momentary balance between their real and distant involvements. Mobile technology, then, is morally loaded technology: people take sides with mobile-initiated contours, and relate to them in many ways, ranging from doing nothing to verbal and, sometimes, physical violence. This paper shows that these ways to manage these moral problems cannot be separated from technology; successful mobile technology must cope with this fact, or its chances of survival decrease (cf. Mick & Fournier 1998; Giesler and Pohlmann 2002).

The first studies of mobile telephones showed that mobile telephony in general is a “disturbing” technology and that people use several successful techniques to manage these disturbances. The first analyses focused on the etiquette of the use of mobile phones (see Kopomaa 2000: 87–101; Ling 2004: 125–130). Rules concerning the use of mobile phones specify places, times and situations in which they can and cannot be used. In many settings—such as restaurants—the use of mobile phones is discouraged (Ling 2004: 127). Users can address the problem through technical solutions; for example, by turning off or silencing the phone when one is not available and using vibration instead of the ring tone. Still, phones have been forbidden in concert halls, schools, meetings and many other settings (for institutional settings, see Katz 2004; Ling 2002: 293–296).

Multimedia in mobile phones is a new disturbing element. Multimedia applications such digital television, visual radio, multimedia messaging and media streaming all potentially create disturbing noise and disrupt social settings. The use of mobile multimedia challenges established socially acceptable behavior in many cases. This is an important product development issue because mobile phones are carried around at virtually all times and potentially used in a much greater number of places than any other piece of technology.

The tensions between situational demands and the decontextualizing effects of the mobile phone have been analyzed by Licoppe and his colleagues from a perspective stemming from Goffman’s sociology (Licoppe and Heurtin 2001, 2002; Morel 2002; Licoppe 2003). For example, the contexts of receivers of calls may be upset by the call. The call may even infringe on the personal space of the call-taker. Licoppe also shows how call-takers’ try to

imagine the recipient’s schedules and location when making a call. These social psychological constructs guide use just as etiquette does.

FACE AND MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

Following Licoppe, we may build on Erving Goffman’s work to understand how mobile multimedia functions in interaction. How these actions take place in detail can best be studied in terms of Goffman’s notion of “face.” People maintain a line of activity that maintains their self-image in an internally consistent way that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants (Goffman 1967: 6). For people, face is ritually important. More than convenience is at stake: ultimately, it is the participants’ trust in that they can go about in their lives in an orderly manner that may be threatened (see Garfinkel 1967; Sacks 1994, II: 220–222). The concept of face also makes it possible to compare findings from cultures that value face highly (for example, East Asia) and those that put less stress on face (like Europe).

In another paper, we have described three face management strategies (Koskinen and Repo 2005). Firstly, face-work consists of avoiding contacts that are likely to threaten the person’s face. People figure that they would get into problems, if they did something that is too far from the bounds of normal, and keep in line because of these imagined bystander responses. Secondly, when someone’s face is threatened, a four-step interchange is performed to re-establish its sanctity. In a challenge, participants call attention to misconduct. The response is the offering: the offender is given a chance to correct for the offense and re-establish the expressive order by, say, showing that the threat was meaningless, or unintentional. One may also compensate one’s actions for others. The third move is typically acceptance, followed by the offender’s “gratitude for those who have given him the indulgence of forgiveness” (Goffman 1967: 22). Thirdly, people can exploit face-saving actions. For example, one may fish for compliments by being overly modest; another may threaten the bystanders’ face to make them flounder; a third can arrange for the others to hurt his feelings and thus to force them to feel guilt (Goffman 1967: 24).

The concept of “face-work” directs our attention to understand how by transforming ordinary courses of action, new technology is judged by these transformations by users and bystanders alike. In this paper, we focus on mobile multimedia, which is fast becoming ubiquitous. However, we cannot extrapolate results from the conventional mobile phones directly to mobile multimedia. Firstly, creating multimedia messages is a disruptive activity. For example, people pose for the device (see Koskinen et al. 2002). Secondly, there is the noise from the device which, with ring tones aside, is not typically the case with mobile phones. Thirdly, people routinely share content with mobile phones (Kasesniemi 2003; Weilenmann and Larsson 2001), but this practice is apparently more common with multimedia (see Repo et al. 2003; Scifo 2004). In sum, mobile multimedia reorganizes the interactional domain significantly. How does it happen, and which techniques do people use to manage the implications of these activities?

DATA AND METHODS

This paper is based on a field trial on streaming video to mobile phones, carried out in Helsinki at the end of 2002. Mobile phones suitable for viewing videos were given to persons of various ages,

TABLE 1
Breakdown: the social context of mobile multimedia

| | | |
|------------------------------------------------|----|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| User-initiated interactions N=29 (51%) | 7 | Keeping children quiet |
| | 4 | Relaxing (an alternative for television) |
| | 4 | Having something to do while waiting |
| | 14 | Other purposes or no data |
| Avoidance* N=13 (23%) | 13 | Avoidance |
| Bypasser-initiated interactions* N=14 (25%) | 6 | Reparative process |
| | | <i>Prompts social action</i> |
| | 2 | Aggressive uses of face-work |
| | 8 | 6 Drift: entertaining children leads to interaction among adults |

* Face-work involved.

gender and backgrounds. They were encouraged to watch videos in various different situations and asked to report their experiences in a diary. Technically, the trial was carried out with Nokia 7650 phones running the Symbian operating system, RealOne Player and video streaming over a GPRS (General Packet Radio Service) connection at 22 kbps. (More details in Repo et al. 2003). In video streaming, the phone simply shows that part of the video currently being transmitted. This means that the length of the streamed video can, in principle, be infinite. On the other hand, streamed videos cannot be saved, nor can they be forwarded.

Users were asked to watch the videos available at Elisa.TV, a mobile portal for streaming videos (wap.elisa.net/elisatv). The supply comprised 46 readymade videos in which entertainment and karaoke accounted for the majority. The trial setting was not set up for the purpose of our study.

Nine users filled the diary for a week, starting from Monday. In the diary, people described their routines and activities with the phone daily, including details of the physical and social context of use. The diary was designed so that it prescribed a task for each evaluation day. It also contained more specific instructions and one A4 blank sheet per day for reporting. Participants were entitled to keep the diary as they best saw fit. Some of the participants used up the whole space while others only wrote down a few principal comments. On average, the users were 25.1 years old. There were six women and three men with, on average, secondary degree education and little experience of multimedia phones. During the week, 115 use-episodes were described in the diaries, i.e., roughly 2 episodes a day for each person.

The diary method has its strengths and pitfalls (see De Longis et al. 1992). A diary produces data from places where researchers might not obtain access and it provides an insight into the users' interpretations, especially if the diary uses open-ended questions, as in this study. However, people are generally unreliable observers of some aspects of their own behavior. In particular, they may find it difficult to observe other people and interaction. Also, they get tired with the diary: four diary-keepers got increasingly imprecise as the week progressed. This potentially decreases data quality because if not every field (event) in a diary is filled completely, cell

frequencies are too small for cross-tabulation with several variables. Consequently, we keep our analysis simple and emphasize taxonomy over statistical analysis. The data is translated from Finnish and Swedish, and the people are kept anonymous.

MOBILE MULTIMEDIA IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the diary data, there were 31 instances in which the device was used alone, i.e. outside social context (27%). In 28 cases, there was no description of the use context. In 56 cases (49%), the phone was used in a social context. Table 1 breaks the social context into three separate classes. In roughly 51% of cases, the device became a focus of joint attention because of the user, who used the device for certain ends that can roughly be classified into three main categories. In 23% of cases conform to Goffman's notion of the avoidance process, while in 25% of cases, interactions were initiated by bypassers.

As a backdrop, we may start with the 29 cases in which the user initiated that interaction, typically with a purpose. These use situations range from relaxing after evening meal to having something to do while waiting for service in banks and buses. Here the device was used as a portable television. One informant tells: "I was waiting for my turn to get to the pitch, and watched clips. Still somewhat bored to see the same videos again. Music videos are perhaps the best thing" (diary # 2, episode 12). Of course, this is a classic use of portable games, personal stereos (Bull 2000), mobile phones and text messages: people use these devices to relax and to entertain themselves in boring situations in everyday life.

More purposeful uses are possible as well. In one instance, a woman tells how she used the device to entertain his pre-teen boy. She managed to keep him silent with the device: "I walked to the station to meet my son, and went to the barber's shop, where we had to wait for 15 minutes. Said to my son that we can watch videos for that time. He watched 'Small bird,' or was it the 'Toad' clip. I'm not sure anymore. He had a good time with the video. The barber and his customer did not react to the phone" (Diary #9, episode 19).

As these examples show, people can use the device for a variety of purposes. For adult users, it becomes a tool of sorts, something to be used skillfully to manage primarily the emotional

contingencies of everyday life, boredom being the most prevalent of these contingencies.

Avoidance

In many cases, mobile video was watched among strangers, but with no attention whatsoever by them. This is how avoidance works: people refrain from actions that might lead to exchanges with outsiders. This is one way to manage the potentially disruptive tendencies of mobile multimedia. One user relates: "I wouldn't use [the device] in the bus. What if next to me is someone who is exhausted from his job and harassed by his boss who gets annoyed because of the scratchy sound. No thank you." (Diary # 6, episode 7). Thus, politeness and consideration is practiced in normal situations. Other vocabularies of motives that people used to explain avoidance were a wish to avoid aggressive bystanders' remarks, and a wish to avoid being labeled as snobs who just want to "show off" with their new gadgets.

Imaginary as these possible responses are, they have significant consequences for action. This strategy lets people go about their lives undisturbed and keeps people away from troubles. As a result, the most common experience was "civil inattention," a failure to extend civil inattention to others is not negatively sanctioned in a direct and open fashion (Goffman 1963: 87). This footing is a key element in the smooth accomplishment of everyday life. Even so, there is an important social process going on. When users think that bystanders could respond to their actions in a face-threatening fashion, they might avoid challenging the perpetrator to avoid any risks. In consequence, others are not bothered, and normal order is maintained.

Bypasser-Initiated Interactions

Above we gave examples of user-initiated interactions. This section turns to bypasser-initiated interactions that center around mobile video. By "bystanders," we mean people who are not originally a part of the user's addressed audience. Thus, a friend whom one asks to see a video is not a bypasser; a stranger who peeks in over the user's shoulder and poses a question concerning the device is. In contrast to the avoidance process, here we face a combination of social psychological orientations and real actions. Such bypasser-initiated responses were prevalent in data: in all, there were 27 such cases.

In the first type, bypassers somehow signaled the user that they were disturbed by what the user was doing. Typically, bypassers' reactions initiated a restorative process in which the user turned down the device and behaviors around it. In all cases in these data, these repair-initiations were indirect and in many ways inconspicuous. In one particularly illustrative case, a woman tells what she did when she noticed her activities disturbed other people: "On my way back to [suburban Helsinki], I watched something. The mood in the train was really calm. Some people woke up, but didn't say anything. I felt terrible... I immediately turned the volume down." (Diary # 9, episode 13).

This is a minimal, truncated reparative process, consisting of only two steps instead of the four-step procedure described by Goffman (1967). Here, the three last steps as described by Goffman are amalgamated into the second step, which becomes interactionally dense. In the example given above, the turning down of the volume not only acknowledged the bystanders' reaction, but it also offered an apology, which was accepted without words or smiles of any sort. This action may be dense, but it is meaningful and does its job.

In a few cases, more extensive social action evolved around the device, which brought bystanders into contact with the user around the device. Goffman (1963: 174) described "drift" as a

process in which participants are carried further and further into the encounter up to a point in which they rule the enviroing reality out from their concerns. In six cases, the device was used to manage the ebb and flow of social life typical to children.

The difference to just keeping children entertained is that here, action spills over to adults. The device becomes an object of intergenerational attention. Children—and particularly boys—are key players in this process in that their curiosity not just attracts adults' attention, but also lowers their threshold to pose questions and express their amazement significantly.

Finally in two cases, the device was used for aggressive face-work (Goffman 1967). When people used the device, they noticed that bystanders were disturbed. However, they did not tone their behavior down. Rather, they got more excited because of the disturbance, and continued on their previous line with more vigor. Thus in one case, a group of teenagers decided to watch karaoke videos from the phone, and sing along: "We watched karaoke today in the school cafeteria. It was fun, all of us at the table singing together. The other diners looked at us with an expression of "good grief!" on their faces—but we didn't let that bother us" (Diary # 8, episode 5). Users did not attract bystanders' attention to the device. Rather, they just used it, and the use attracted attention.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown that mobile multimedia is a social device in many ways. It is used to initiate interactions, and it attracts bystander attention that sometimes lead to toning the device down, sometimes to more extensive joint action. In our data, roughly 49% of uses described had evidence of significant social involvement. In roughly 51% of these, the user used it to initiate interactions. In 25%, it was the bypasser who initiated interaction. In the remaining 23%, the users took the social context account to the extent that no noticeable social effect was noticed, for example, by keeping the sound so quiet that no one got disturbed.

Moreover, and just as importantly, this analysis has shown that mobile multimedia technology is not morally neutral; it affects the way in which people act and allocate their involvement. In reorganizing their priorities and attention, it becomes a target for moral judgment. The main benefit of the late sociologist Erving Goffman's (1967) notion of "face-work" is that it sensitizes us to these interactional and moral issues, thus making it possible for us to understand the social context of this ever-growing aspect of mobile telephony. "Face-work" describes well coping with tensions arising from mobile multimedia with the exception of the truncated reparative process. Although our data is from one culture only, the concept of face could also be used to explore variations in interaction patterns across cultures (cf. Ito 2005; Ling 2004; Licoppe 2003).

An analysis of interaction with the concept of face provides us with an access to the interactive grounds of moral reasoning, reflected in people's opinions and attitudes. Closing one's eyes from these moral issues leads to neglect important social forces at work in the domestication process of new technology.

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