

Ubiquitous wireless communication breaks barriers (Part 2)

Paradigm shifts, behavioral aspects, and dynamics of discourse

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This segment illustrates paradigm shifts, user behavior, as well as facets of social discourse through voice and text. Mobile technology rapidly conquered our life and work<sup>1</sup>. Its social impact will outdo the effects of television. It also seems as if a new language surfaced. Some authors, however, noted that only modest research is available yet (Harper, 2002; Palen, Salzman, & Youngs, 2000). Indeed, Crispin Thurlow and Alex Brown (n.d.) suggested "to acknowledge the speed with which these communication technologies are changing and [that] academic research ... slides towards obsolescence before it even gets going." This paper explores how mobile dialogue connects the unconnected in one way, and disjoins what belongs together in another.

When previously wired communications technologies, such as telephones, became unwired, several paradigm shifts occurred. The innovation of the Global System for Mobile Communications<sup>2</sup>, for example, cultivated a noteworthy consequence: the prospect of being permanently reachable, while simultaneously being able to reach out to others at any time. Geoff Cooper (2002) suggested that the "possibility of perpetual contact" could result in "opportunity or demand" (p. 27). Palen et al (2000) studied how new subscribers embrace mobile phones and found that *new* opportunities for dialog evolve because "phones exist in places where they didn't before and can be used at times when phones weren't normally used in the past." They observed as well, that "social coordination quickly grew to become a very important part of communication practice." Demand, in contrast, emerges when *expected* availability invades formerly guarded areas. Stephanie Wood (2004), for example, commented on the diverse duties of employed female parents. She argued that the *perceived simplification of life* through increased use of communications technologies resulted in a converse effect: "endless demands." John Sherry and Tony Salvador (2002) concluded (referring to

workplaces) that continuous openings to "[do] things that are free of time and space" (p. 118) obstruct focus on current issues. Similarly, Diana Gant and Sara Kiesler (2002) referred to work-related calls occurring during time off from work. They contended that the association of a phone number with a person (rather than with a physical space<sup>3</sup>) lessens hesitation to call at formerly unusual times. The blending of traditionally separated "domains" (Cooper, 2002, p. 22), such as family versus workspaces, day versus nighttime, public versus private zones, and quiet versus noisy areas<sup>4</sup>, thus dismantles once respected barriers.

Anthony M. Townsend (2002) noted that mobile technology causes "fundamental transformations in individuals' perceptions of self and the world" (p. 62). Cooper (2002) concluded that "[t]he mobile ... facilitate[s] the transparency of the world" (p. 21), creating an "illusion" of presence (Eitzen, 2003). Space and time appear irrelevant and supposedly allow completing more work while dedicating more time to family. The erroneous belief is that we are simultaneously present in two settings. Yet, besides dismantling barriers and tolerating a fallacy, we also consent to *supplemental opportunities* for dialog, "anytime, anywhere, anyplace" (Harkin, 2003, p. 23). Added to traditional social discourse, they cause disproportional stimulation and fragmentation. A torrent of puzzle pieces offering and demanding information and interaction forces users to maneuver through concurrent thought, activity, talk, writing, reading, and emotion. Society's infiltration with mobile technology therefore must concern us. Townsend (2002) wrote that the "diffusion of the mobile phone was among the fastest of any technology in history" (p. 63). Its omnipresence invites speculation about the resulting social and psychological effects. Television comes to mind as a comparable, widely diffused communication technology.

Neil Postman (1986) commented on missing continuity in television programs (in particular news programs). Their effortlessly digestible information fragments condition viewers "[to abandon] logic, reason, sequence and rules of contradiction" (p. 105). Comprehension skill and the ability to process abstract and complex thought deteriorate. Once conditioned, viewers lack talent to establish proper links between interrelated information segments, and struggle to avoid accidental links between truly unrelated information. Mobile discourse forces on us focus–distribution, resembling television's fragmentary effect. Mobile communication increases the pace and quantity of concurrent "social intercourse" (Thurlow & Brown, n.d.). Thus, users frequently engage in simultaneous local–analog and distant–wireless discourse<sup>5</sup>. Imagine you are en route to the grocery store with a shopping list on your mind. A stranger asks for directions while you cross a street, while a driver honks, while you look for the store's sign, while you speak on your mobile phone, while the phone receives a text message. Our senses do not sustain these stimuli without consequences. Following the stone, agricultural, and industrial ages (Fitzgerald, 2002), the twenty-first century already cements its legacy as the 'Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) Age'<sup>6</sup>.

Studies of mobile communication use found that there are notable linguistic aspects, too<sup>7</sup>. A form of written literacy evolved amongst mobile users exchanging text messages<sup>8</sup>. For example: *'T grp proj wil b due b4 thur xams'*<sup>9</sup> means 'The group project will be due before Thursday's exams'. Shortness and efficiency appear to be the principal attributes of textual exchanges. Thurlow and Brown (n.d.), however, found only 18.75% abbreviations in their text messaging study. They concluded that this contests "popular ideas about the unintelligible, highly abbreviated 'code' of young people's text-messaging." In viewing the example, one might even reason that a new language emerged. Harper (2002), however, believed that the

short form used in text messages "[has] less to do with sustaining (or creating) a new language than it has to do with the fact that it makes communicating quicker" (p. 221). A historical instance makes both arguments believable: using code to shorten messages in nineteenth century telegrams only saved cost and transmission time (Standage, 1998). No new language evolved then, no new language will evolve now. Mobile communication merely produced new and uncomplicated, non-competing communication *configurations* (Harper, 2002).

Broad agreement exists about the main motivation for using mobile communications: sustaining social contact<sup>10</sup>. However, Gary M. Olson and Judy S. Olson (2003) alluded to the conflicting beliefs that communications technology leads to increased interaction *and* isolation. Christopher Dryer, Chris Eisbach, and Wendy Ark (1999) contrasted omnipresent computers and individuals' need for social interaction. They concluded: "pervasive computers ... disrupt social interactions." Similarly, Stanley Eitzen (2003) stated: "the current communications revolution increases interaction while reducing intimacy." This illustrates that ubiquitous wireless communication breaks more than barriers. Previously distinct social spheres, such as public and private life blend and seemingly connect us. At the same time, quantity and frequency of contact increase while the social depth of discourse diminishes (Harkin 2003; Harper, 2002<sup>11</sup>). Discourse "anytime, anywhere" (Sherry & Salvador, 2003, p. 114) not only creates an illusion of presence, but is also a prescription for ADD. The *prospect* of being in reach and the *choice* we make when initiating contact are at the core of the matter. Only by selectively discarding stimuli, focus remains possible and lessens the information-fragmentation. Content discrimination is the vaccine against an epidemic of 'Mobile ADD'.

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## End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Recall, that wireless communication devices include phones, hybrid personal digital assistants (e.g. mobile phones complemented by calendaring applications), and text-only paging devices.
- <sup>2</sup> GSM. Technology standard that originated in Europe. Networks are compatible, so that a subscriber of one network can be reached at his/her number in foreign networks (given that providers partner with the user's home network). See <http://www.gsmworld.com/about/history/index.shtml>
- <sup>3</sup> See also Townsend (2002), p. 70.
- <sup>4</sup> See Murtagh (2002). His study considered the use of mobile phones on trains, and discussed how individuals receiving a call on their mobile phones as well as present observers responded (pp. 84–87). Hence, the distinction between a public, noisy space, and a private, calm space.
- <sup>5</sup> See also Plant (n.d.), p.33.
- <sup>6</sup> ADD symptoms are "short attention span" and "blocked memory [and] language" (Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 1998).
- <sup>7</sup> The Oxford Dictionary (1998) explains "linguistic" as "pertaining to language or languages." An analysis of spoken language in wireless communications, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. The study of oral literacy requires examination of ethnological aspects, linguistic abilities, social settings, demographical characteristics, and group relationships as exemplified by the subjects in a study.
- <sup>8</sup> In GSM networks SMS = Short Message Service. Messages are commonly limited to 160 characters. Users compose messages and address them to the intended subscribers' phone number. Source: personal experience.
- <sup>9</sup> This illustrative message was mimicked using "orthographic forms" found by Thurow & Brown (n.d.).
- <sup>10</sup> E.g. Plant (n.d.); Palen et al (2000); Harkin (2003).
- <sup>11</sup> For example: since the acknowledgement of a text message is optional and not projected by the sender, such messages resemble "gifts" (Harkin, 2003, p. 21; Harper, 2002, pp. 221–222). Mobile users realized that dropping a message makes aftereffects improbable. They evade (potentially discomfoting) direct contact, at the expense of diminishing depth of social discourse. See also Plant (n.d.), p. 56.



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