

REVIEW

The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society

*Compact, inexpensive, and ubiquitous mobile phones
both bring us together and move us apart.*

Review by John Stuckey

The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society, Rich Ling, (The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Interactive Technologies), Morgan Kaufman Publishers, an Imprint of Elsevier, San Francisco, CA 94111, 2004, 244pp.

American Rich Ling is a senior research scientist at Telenor, Norway's largest telecommunications company. His training is as a sociologist, and it is this discipline, plus social psychology, that lies behind this study of mobile telephony, as behind his Telenor responsibilities, which involve studying the social implications of new information technologies.

Because the work's focus is not on the technology *per se*, Ling breezes through "History of Mobile Telephony" in a quick five pages that offer little more than a naming of the alphabet soup of transmission standards. Similarly brief but more interesting is his description of the explosive growth of mobile phone use and the interesting variation in national adoption patterns. ITU data from 2002, for example, show the greatest penetration in Europe (nearly 50 mobiles per 100 persons), followed closely by Oceania (mainly Australia and New Zealand), also in the high 40s, the Americas (short of 30, with the US reporting about 49), Asia/Middle East (12), and Africa (4).

Those continental rates mask considerable national variation, naturally. Asia/Middle East averaged only 12 per 100, but Taiwan's national rate was the highest in the world, at 106 mobile phones per 100 persons. Tiny Luxembourg also had a ratio of more than 1 to 1, although back about five points. China's penetration was

embryonic, at 16, but because of its vast population it was already the world's largest market, with more than 200 million subscribers.

These national variations also add significance to the book, since as a reviewer from the US I know how easily many in my country assume that technology development and adoption emanates from there. In fact, there are many factors accounting for both the far higher adoption rates in many other countries and the significant national differences in adoption rates (consider the recognized advantages of mobile telephony in a rapidly developing country without a substantial landline infrastructure, for example). Needless to say, national averages themselves mask wide variation in different areas and strata within a nation. In the 2002 report, the ITU registered only about seven mobiles per 100 persons in Egypt, yet as early as the late 1990s I observed what seemed near universal use among students at the American University of Cairo -- a far higher proportion of use than was true at that time on my own US campus. Permit me one more local observation, which Ling makes. In much of the rest of the world, the caller pays for the cost of the call. In the US, it has been much more common for the cost of the call to be shared by the calling and called parties, putting the called party somewhat at the mercy of the calling and arguably diminishing the attraction of carrying a mobile phone.

Chapter Two deals with one of his central concerns: to what extent is society shaping this technology, and to what extent is the opposite true. He examines several approaches that only a sociologist could love: technical determinism, social determinism, "affordances" (the technology makes some things possible and facilitates some types of behavior), and "domestication" (the successful incorporation of new technologies into society undergoes several predictable steps). Although he plucks relevant points from the others, Ling embraces the last possibility as most productive, so let me quickly enumerate the phases of incorporation he lists, followed by my brutally abbreviated understanding of them:

- *imagination* (we become aware of the technology)
- *appropriation* (we see how it could be of use to us)
- *objectification* (we personalize the technology and its uses)
- *incorporation* (we make the technology part of our lives)
- *conversion* (we become identified with our use of the technology)

Ling next devotes a chapter each to the obvious appeal of mobile phones for security and safety uses and to the social effects of the temporal coordination of our affairs that the devices make possible. The former topic is fairly intuitive and is probably the reason many of us gave mobile phones to our children and parents, although he makes clear that such intended uses do not necessarily comprise the dominant uses the phones wind up serving for their recipients. The latter topic contains an interesting if barely relevant discussion of the history of timekeeping but goes on to address one of his major interests: that the social effect of "microcoordination" is more complex and interactive than seems evident at first glance. The point is clear enough once raised. Without question, we can better coordinate the details of our social interactions, our comings and goings, our finding each other, if we can talk quickly to each other from no matter where. Less obvious is the fact that having such an unprecedented ability exerts an impact on the forms of our social interaction themselves, not only the ways we make and keep our appointments but the sort of appointments we make and other details of our daily lives.

No age group is more identified with nor active in innovative uses of mobile telephony than teenagers, and Ling devotes a long chapter to studies and his own observations of their uses of both voice communication and text messaging. A later chapter examines text messaging as a separate phenomenon of the mobile phone era. Between those two chapters, Ling discusses mobile phones' (or their users') oft-remarked intrusiveness in social space and the effects of phone use on social interactions.

The concluding chapter returns full-face to the author's sociology roots, addressing the macrosocial impact of the mobile phone. Is it an element of social capital, bringing us together, binding the individual to society, giving us a common social language and set of norms? Or is it a force of individualization, moving us apart, allowing each of us to go his or her own way, to resist socialization, to ignore or oppose community values? Or, of course, is it some of both? What were the effects of the transistor, the automobile, the printing press, the steam engine? And how will compact, inexpensive, ubiquitous mobile phones stack up alongside them?

I'd be less than informative if I described this book as an easy, casual read. It is much closer to a college sociology text or dissertation than to a breezy and informal history and analysis of mobile telephone use. That's not a criticism. The book is encyclopedic in its documentation, statistical and textual, both of mobile telephony and, especially, of sociological and social psychological theory. The topic is fascinating, important, and of universal relevance.

John Stuckey is the Director of University Computing at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA.

Source: Ubiquity, Volume 5, Issue 28, Sept. 8 - 14, 2004, <http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/>