

# Mobile Me: Approaches to mobile media use by children and young people

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## Introduction

Due to the notable enthusiasm for mobile phones of teenagers, and the propensity for young mobile users to engage in innovative uses of their mobiles, there has been considerable scholarly interest in younger mobile users and their activities. Recent work by, among others, May and Hearn (2005) and especially Goggin (2006) has also drawn greater attention to the transformation of social, material and cultural lives across generations that mobile phones have facilitated. Likewise, journalistic interest in the mobile phone has been widespread, often exhibiting features of a typical 'moral panic' confronted by the various dangers ascribed to the use and abuse of the mobile phone (see Goggin, 2006). Actors from the telecommunications industry, both industry bodies (for example, the Australian Media and Telecommunications Authority) and some individual suppliers of mobile telephonic goods and services to children (see, for example, <geckoworld.com.au>), have addressed community concerns about the risks to health and security, and the appropriateness of downloadable mobile content, usually by offering assurances about the standards that are applied, providing advice for children and parents, and referring complaints to appropriate authorities, including the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

While scholarly inquiry has been richly informed by exponents of cultural anthropology and ethnography, the prevalence of anecdote and hasty, instinctive (perhaps intuitive) policy analysis in public discourse and journalistic reporting has become widespread. Meanwhile, commercial market research has focused on recognising and targeting potential market sectors and shoring up a larger share of an important market.

In this paper, we aim to contribute to this debate by considering two aspects of the field which, we believe, will be important as the study of mobile phones progresses. The first of these is the consideration of mobile phones as mobile media. Also, industry buzzwords like 'convergence', and the increasing availability (if not always use) of applications such as cameras, audio recorders (and players), internet browsers, mobile television and location-based applications, are driving us to consider what (new, different, threatening, creative, delightful) things might be done with these appliances.

We have turned to a classic of new media impact in order to build a framework for the present inquiry. The late and much-missed Roger Silverstone's (1999) *Why Study the Media?* is a short elegant rumination on our scholarly engagement with media. Silverstone offers a perspective that allows a long-term view of media studies, whereby new forms and technologies do not always require new starts. He reminds us always to ask what is *the same* about this new medium, as well as what is *different*? This prompts us to situate mobile media in *locations* (the home and the community, among others), to consider

*dimensions* of media use (play, performance and consumption), and to suggest how trust, memory and our understanding of 'otherness' help us *make sense* of mediated experience. We also recall that Silverstone saw media as a social tool which had useful impacts and communicative functions for its users as a group. The second aspect for us to consider, therefore, is how we engage with and involve young people in mobile media research, and facilitate these young voices being heard in the scholarly, media and public policy debates that impact upon their lives.

Our approach is adapted from Silverstone, and we endeavour to incorporate his ethical and social priorities in our thinking and design. Our collaborators are emerging younger media users, approached as individuals, as communities, as cohorts and as researchers. We acknowledge in so doing that, whilst there is an undeniable pervasiveness and ubiquity in new mobile media, there is also a necessary element of continuity which has to be taken into account in assessing impact and use. Points of continuation include, crucially, the ongoing conditions of young people's lives and opportunities that characterise media use in place. We are thus reminded that mobile media are also located media, operating sometimes in step but also sometimes out of sync with the places that matter to their users, and affect their ways of using media available to them. This is particularly important as we must always remember that places and the structures of feeling that inform life in such places can change, develop and revert to type at a different rate than the technologies which contribute to the spaces formed by ideas of home, family and childhood. We aim, therefore, to question how young mobile media users are, through various iterations of mobile media literacy, participating in the formation, elaboration and contestation of mediated spaces within defined places. This obviously attaches to defined identities and how those might themselves be contested through media use, both beyond and in reaction to the sources of such definition, whether by government, education and parental (or similar) authorities.

In summary, then, we aim to:

- see mobile phone studies as mobile media studies, in the sense that Silverstone views media studies;
- contrast a view of young mobile media users as having, and demonstrating, creative potential as literate mobile users with one that sees them as risks and markets and audiences; and
- suggest a framework for considering young mobile media users as situated in (and contesting) mediated social and political spaces and places, at least partly (but never fully) of their own generation and modification.

## **A manifesto: Silverstone's *Why Study the Media?***

Mobile phones are just one amongst several technologies of mediated communications. As such, they are subject to the repetitions as well as the innovations induced by new technologies and unexpected deployments. Our primary focus is young people's processes of socialisation and the role that mobile media play in these social interactions. We prioritise the *user* over the *technology* as the primary agent of change in the present project. The user is defined both as an individual and as a collective actor in mediated situations.

Silverstone's book can be read as a manifesto with sixteen key points, not all of which will be tackled here. We have modelled our theoretical boundaries with those that best fit with young people's lives, with the idea of childhood, and with a spatial approach to mobility. Where we have exchanged a particular term for Silverstone's original, we indicate the shift by square brackets:

- 1 Dimensions of Experience: Play, Performance, Consumption
- 2 Locations of Action and Experience: House, Community, [Nation]
- 3 Making Sense [of Being Young]: Trust, Memory, [Multiculturalism]

The project is therefore firmly focused on the social uses and lived experience associated with mobile phone technologies. It is indebted also to Silverstone's (1987) work on media as transitional objects in social and psychological development. Media, he suggests there, are psycho-social objects in the mimetic processes of everyday life. His argument focused on television, but we propose that the mobile technologies are at least as significant as broadcast media (and the forms of sociality which they encourage) in the communal mimetics of mediated social reproduction. The approach taken to the technologies of our increasingly mediated lives is to emphasise the user: 'technology is not to be understood merely as a machine. It includes the skills and competencies, the knowledge and the desire, without which it cannot work.' (1987: 21) In a more recent work, published posthumously this year, Silverstone (2007) expands upon this to emphasise the great care that needs to be taken with our definitions — and therefore conceptualisations — of those whose presence, experiences and actions we observe when we study:

this person, this individual listens and watches and e-mails and texts and seeks information on-line, and who talks about what has been seen or heard and learned or understood or who, alternatively, resists or ignores it? An audience member? A spectator? A user? A communicator? A consumer? A producer? A 'prosumer'? A citizen? A player? And how are we to assess such an individual's power in this mediated world? As nonentity passively and impotently on the receiving end of the continuous stream of communications, or as an active, and more or less skilled, participant in the management of her or his own media culture? (2007: 107)

## Who is 'this [mobile] person'?

The definition of 'this person' that prevails within the market is the consumer. Commercial providers of telecommunications products and services have interests in discovering or creating markets of consumers who are willing to pay — or willing to be sold on as audiences — to advertising agencies and their clients. The rapid growth in various mobile markets may be slowing as industry looks for the next big thing — the 'killer app(lication)' — to revitalise lagging growth figures. Nonetheless, new products and services are being added to the mobile phone to provide both new sources of potential income and new sites of mediated activities with their attendant potentialities and controversies. The 'risks' perceived as arising out of potential for multiple uses by various types of users are being noted by the industry, which recognises the imperatives (both ethical and commercial) for forms of regulation. The Mobile Entertainment Forum, for example, has noted that what is needed are 'rules — good rules — to protect the growth prospects of the business while ensuring that the public is entertained but protected' (Bud, 2003).

*Note:* growth requires *protection*; the public requires both *protection* and *entertainment*. Both are passive positions. Other industry players provide guidelines for appropriate mobile use that engage mobile phone users as active decision-makers with appeals to supposedly commonly held notions such as privacy and manners (AMTA, n.d.) or make explicit claims about the probable negative (and threatening) responses by authority figures — and peers — when mobiles are used in prohibited circumstances. One example is Gecko.com:

Here's six reasons why you shouldn't use Gecko in school:

- 1 If you thought your Maths teacher was scary, wait till your Gecko goes off in class!
- 2 Your Maths teacher will probably ring your Mum or Dad to tell them, and that'll be even worse!
- 3 You fail your Maths test because you were talking on your Gecko when you should've been learning.
- 4 Your Maths teacher goes off at you for failing your test (you're smarter than that) and rings your Mum or Dad (see Point 2).
- 5 It's not cool to distract your classmates when they're trying to learn.
- 6 Your best mate will take you off their Gecko Tree because you got them in trouble for talking during class. (<geckoworld.com>)

These efforts at installing discipline are designed for very young and probably less experienced mobile phone users (between six and ten years). They accompany a phone with significant restrictions on its capacity — limited phone contacts monitored by parents and so forth. This represents one end of a spectrum of attempted surveillance and control over mobile users, designed as 'a kid's mobile that give us parents peace of mind' (geckoworld.com, 2007). This is one example of industry seeking to provide the apparent 'protection' that risk-averse parents seek.

Our point is that, while understandable — especially among the very young — this is a view of mobile use that runs short of the potentialities that we see in the uses of mobile media — even children's mobile media.

To return to Silverstone (who finally settles on the term 'participants' for his media users and audiences, signifying further conjectures about aspects of these participants' agency which 'implies some kind of responsibility' (2007: 107–8)), there are other aspects of mobile use beyond entertainment and protection that require consideration. These involve power and politics. The politics affecting children and young people's lives is scaled by their own mobility, by the rules and relationships of classrooms and schoolyards and street life, and in the home. They are also implicated in the formal, macro-level politics of government and market regulation:

*Technology* can also be seen as *politics*. And this in two dimensions. This politics that emerges ... *around* the media is a politics of access and regulation, and the politics that may or may not be enabled within the media is a politics of participation and representation, in both senses of the word, in which new forms of democracy might emerge; or, indeed, new forms of tyranny. (Silverstone, 1999: 26)

New forms of mediated relationships may go beyond entertainment and risk into realms of communicative agency and discursive structuration. That may mean children and young people's engagement with the creation of meaningful communities of interest, or access to wider discussion forums as in online forums. Technology is political if access ascribes power to the users; it is also political if users are hailed by communities which require their spending, their loyalty or their legitimating presence. There is also a pre-political stage which indicates that the everyday conversations conducted online require a social etiquette and understanding of the politics of interpersonal communication. Without that understanding, there may be smaller tyrannies of access and privilege, and interpersonal power struggles playing out in mobile situations. Parents monitoring the 'text-wars' of junior high school can attest to the panic caused. The permanency of the text seems

poised to pull young people into conflict in ways which are harder to unsay — to undo and disprove.

We raise the cruel banalities of bullying and mobile rows because they are the sharp end of communicative action, and afford a reminder that genres and courtesies in the mobile sphere are hard learned indeed, that the potential for conflict arising out of hasty, incomplete or inconsiderate communications is too easily realised: 'More and more of our lives will be lived in systems space, where efficient and minimal messaging will replace the slow and messy process of dialogue.' (Myerson, 2001: 66)

This immediately raises the issue of fluency in communicative modes. The problem with mobile dialogue is not necessarily that it is insufficiently dialogic, but that the literacy required for effective 'talk' is poorly understood by those who might give ideas and guidance to new users. Conflict occurs in all sorts of communications; the questions we need to raise are similar whatever technologies are in play (or not). What strategies can we learn to manage our interpersonal relationships: listening effectively, imagining the senses of others, empathic talk? These are skills which individuals and communities have to develop for higher level political talk. The technologies motivate genres, but we would argue that all of these are adapted to socialised modes of behaviour and communicative empathy.

Silverstone refers to as sense of 'crisis in the world of communication in which 'the pollution of this mediated environment is threatening our capacity to sustain a reasonable level of humanity' as a motivation — indeed, as essential requirement — for studying media: 'by attending to the realities of global communication, but also and even more so to its possibilities ... we will be able to reverse that otherwise will be a downward spiral towards increasing global incomprehension and inhumanity' (2007: vi).

How, then, to do this? How, then, to construct an understanding of young people's mobile-mediated lives that attends to these realities and possibilities. We continue to follow Silverstone for guidance by considering these lives as lived in locations, in (geographic, cultural, transitional) places, as experienced by individuals in different ways (as play, performance, consumption) and with different sensibilities.

In doing so, we acknowledge that children's voices in public debates about mediated lives have not always been taken seriously, and that participation in research and policy development that affects young lives is a prerequisite for progress in this domain (see New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People, n.d.). Moreover, regional particularities and differences amongst children have often been underplayed, their lives as national subjects — regional residents, for example — requiring greater consideration: 'the connections between media, communication and a child's sense of place might well be a starting point for understanding how the world is experienced by ... young people' (Donald, 2007: 3).

We must consider the user's sense of place: geographic, social, within communities, within families, as interstitial, negotiated zone of adolescence, as the (proscribed, hermetic, or porous and playful) place of childhood. The factors of place and space are intersected and drawn together by activity and intentions. *Users* are *doers* — they are people making decisions, acting (or not), communicating (or not) and thereby generating the place that they inhabit and the (networked) space through which they are 'mobile'. They are the Mobile Me generation, and should be respected as *generators*, as a starting point in getting to know them better.

## The Mobile Me generation: Generating mobile environments

Much has been made of the role that the user is playing in creating, defining, editing, commenting on or otherwise contributing to the mediated environment. The term 'prosumer', coined to take into account the agency of the otherwise passive consumer, is now part of common media marketing parlance. Telecommunications companies, having taken notice of this concept, endeavour to engage users in the design and ongoing use of their phones. Goggin (2006), noting the extensive research that Nokia (as an exemplar) has undertaken with various user communities, is one company that questions the extent to which phone companies are willing to involve the user: 'I am wondering here whether real engagement with the user would be an ongoing project involving far greater participation in design, corporate government and ownership of the technology, that Nokia, or most of its competitors, are prepared to consider.' (2006: 52)

Phone manufacturers may be reluctant to embrace involvement of user communities, and suspicious of ethnographic inquiries into the use of mobile phones, given the hard questions that may be asked of them both in terms of functionality and cost. However, the fascination with participant design and user-led functionality is causing interest amongst some — with designers themselves leading the way. By exploring the design potentials that arise out of their research in to how young people are managing their relationship networks, creating devices and functions that create stratified and personalised icons for the identities in phone contact lists, designers find that phones are social objects as well as technical and aesthetic ones. (Berg et al., 2003).

Silverstone's precepts provide powerful arguments for countering any industrial uncertainty in making users and participants central to the design, testing and critique of media technologies. They bring to the discussion a sense of place, of modes of consumption and of workable sociality. Indeed, Silverstone offers an ethics of practice which he has long attached to the distribution of media in society. That ethics may well not be of interest to corporate players, however. Goggin is right to question the likelihood of large companies' embrace of these problematic and local iterations of need and vulnerability. Nonetheless, we are also emboldened to insist on trying for a minor triumph in this most public of communication systems by insisting that corporate players are at least formally exposed to the ideas and informed research status of younger people.

## Approaches

Approaches to the study of mobile media have focused around a number of themes; some of these (for example, display of status and the phone as fashion accessory (Ling, 2001, 2005)) are not considered here, for want of space. Those we briefly refer to here present mobile phone use as a new form of media with, therefore, new forms of mediated literacies and social ethics. These are: the language of SMS; micro-coordination, hyper-coordination and 'gifting'; and the mobile (and adolescence) as interstitial place.

The relatively rapid and widely pervasive subsequent popularity of 'texting' was an initial surprise but has since become commonly understood as an essential aspect of mobile youth literacy and culture (Goggin, 2005, 2006: 65ff; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Ling, 2005: 145ff; Weilemann & Larson, 2002; Wynn & Katz, 2000). The specifications of SMS led to new forms of writing to emerge that favoured abbreviation and coded vocabularies. Predictable fears of the polluting influence of SMS on the traditional forms of literacy have usefully been countered by suggestions that texting can display creativity and are not a threat to educational standards (Hearn, 2006). As Silverstone would no doubt point out, the class snobbery of slang and dialect and the perceived threats and blockages to

educational advantage of which they have often been accused now re-emerge in a refusal of 'txt'. As has happened with dialect and slang, however, linguists swiftly generated new lexicons based on the use of acronymy (shortening commonly used words and phrases) and 'emoticonomy' ('smileys' and other facial expressions), and new grammars based on judicious uses of punctuation forms such as ellipsis and exclamation marks (see, for example, Bodomo & Lee, 2002).

Much has also been made of the apparent fondness young people have for incessant and ostensibly frivolous SMS contact with peers. Ling and Yttri (2002) went beyond the micro-coordination that handled logistics and 'softened time'. They outline the concept of hyper-coordination, which involves both coordination with peers and parents and aspects of individual expression and social interaction, including the ability to maintain access to peer groups when not in direct physical proximity (in the classroom or the family home), sometimes by concealing their actions, through the collection of messages and phone numbers to demonstrate popularity and social standing.

A number of studies of messaging have taken up Mauss's (1925/1966) suggestions regarding the importance of reciprocal exchange of 'gifts' in 'archaic' societies to account for and explore the popularity and apparent significance of SMS messages among young people (Green, 2003; Johnson, 2003; Taylor & Harper, 2002). This approach has been very influential for later studies (Ling, 2005; Yoon, 2006), and Ito (2003) expands this view. For Ito, the hierarchies and relationships that are implied and generated by the processes of display and exchange in gifting (not gift giving, but gift exchanging, displaying, requiring) are indicative of power-geometries, much as Mauss, Taylor and Harper et al. suggest.

But these power-geometries are contextual, dependent on location in networks and structures that vary in time and space. For adolescents, this is particularly true: the change in social structures, in numbers, types of levels of proscribed behaviours, between the classroom and the schoolyard, between the living room and the bedroom, between school hours and leisure time, are immense. Consider the restrictions on — and, perhaps consequent, desire for — use, and display, in the classroom, compared with the potential increase in social standing and strengthening of social networks through appropriate forms of display, use and sharing among peer groups and in planning, participating in and evaluating social activities. Even within the family home, the rules of normative behaviour may dictate that the mobile phone is unwisely used to conduct personal, private communication in communal spaces: messages can be read by prying siblings; parental concerns may be raised about the amount of time and money being spent on the phone.

For Ito, then, the power-geometries are such that systems of exchange are dependent on positions within variable social structures — and, moreover, that this is especially so for teenage mobile phone users, adolescents being subject to intergenerational power dynamics as well as newly exposed to their ever more important peer networks, including significant personal and romantic relationships that are to be expected as they expand their world-view beyond their family home. The institutions of home and school are compared with the inter-place zone of adolescent friendship groupings:

Japanese youth, particularly high school students, move between the places of home, school and urban space that are all subject to a high degree of regulation and surveillance by adults ... Unlike the institutions of family and school, youth peer groups and couples are 'institutions' that lack ownership and control of place. The outcome of these power-geometries is that couples and friends have few opportunities for private conversation ... [M]obile email has fulfilled a function akin to co-presence for people that lack the means to share the same private physical space. (Ito, 2003: 20–21)

We suggest that hyper-coordination, gifting and subverting power-geometries are all activities undertaken by young mobile users, and that these may be only some of the types of functions mobile users employ as they continue to develop and *create* forms of mobile media literacy. Moreover, following Ito and Silverstone, and foreshadowed by Meyrowitz (1985), we anticipate that these various forms of mobile, functional and expressive literacy are not only adapted to place but themselves adapt place: the family dinner table and e-classroom may both be places where mobile use is subject to surveillance and restrictions, and places where surveillance and normative restrictions are surreptitiously or openly refused, negotiated and confronted. The mobile phone creates, in an echo of the transitional non-place of adolescence, its own interstitial place — between the family and the peer group, between private and public, between self and others.

## Conclusion

The approach we advocate, then, emphasises media literacies and mediated places and spaces — the means through which young mobile users negotiate their increasingly mediated lives, and the mediated environments which facilitate and limit these negotiations. We ask how young mobile media users are playing, performing, consuming and thereby constructing systems of meaning and purpose; how they are experiencing (and changing the experience of) home and school; how they are building or degrading trust with peers and ‘others’ in heterogeneous communities where cultures are in flux. Our hope and aim are to expand upon and challenge current discourses of mobile youth, thereby providing opportunities for media scholars, marketers, policy-makers and others to hear the range of voices coming from the Mobile Me generation/s.

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