1   Introduction: framing the issues

James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus

Greater than gods

With the invention of the telephone in 1876, it was possible for the first time in history to have real-time conversational interaction at a distance.[1] Back then, the technology was astounding. Early demonstrations of its capability attracted large crowds, most of whom were awe-struck, though some thought it mere legerdemain. By contrast, in the twenty-first century the telephone has for a billion people become, literally, a fixture of everyday life. Only by its absence do we deem it worthy of comment (such as in school classrooms and prisons or in poor countries). The miracle of telephone conversation is too readily forgotten by laypeople and scholars alike. However, the telephone's becoming mobile has re-familiarized many people with the amazement felt by its early witnesses. The exquisite value of the telephone can best be appreciated if one considers the plight of a villager who wants to know if there might be work available in a nearby town, or who needs to summon aid for a sick family member.

Over the years, the telephone has dramatically changed how people live their lives and see their world. Another change of perhaps similar magnitude is in the offing with the mobilization not only of speech but also of a novel array of computer-supported communication and social interaction. Bursty chip-to-chip chats will arrange everything from grocery deliveries to a blind date between two co-located individuals of matching interest profiles. But even today's powers of the mobile phone are extraordinary. In the words of one of our students: "Although my family and I now live in America, I am originally from China. If I want to talk to one of my aunts or uncles, anytime day or night, I just press a button or two on my mobile phone and begin visiting with them."

[1] To be technically precise, there had been something that existed somewhat earlier, sometimes called "the lovers' telephone," which was the equivalent of two tin cans connected by a taut string. Since the mechanical energy of this system dissipated after a few score meters, it cannot be considered a distance-spanning real-time conversational communication technology.

The telephone and its latest mobile incarnation have a unique place in the history of humanity's development. Cars and airplanes were adumbrated respectively by horse-drawn vehicles and birds; as such, humans were at least familiar with what might await once the right technology had been puzzled out. By contrast, nothing in the animal world could allow humans to anticipate the power bestowed by the telephone. In the history of human imagination the power of real-time interactive oral communication over great distances had been a power so great that even most divine beings were considered incapable of it: Zeus, king of the Greek gods, and the rest of the pantheon, had to rely on messenger-boy Mercury. Today a good many messenger boys have their own mobile phones.

A mind- and society-altering technology

The spread of mobile communication, most obtrusively as cell phones but increasingly in other wireless devices, is affecting people's lives and relationships. Cell phones speed the pace and efficiency of life, but also allow more flexibility at business and professional levels as well as in family and personal life. They are a boon for those who feel they are not accomplishing enough. People can harness spare time, or time previously spent in tasks that seem not to require full attention (for instance, waiting on a shopping queue, or, far more disturbingly, driving). They can use this time to plan and coordinate with others, get information or messages. They can even shop remotely by phone while at the same time themselves shopping in person.

Mobile technology also affects the way people interact when face-to-face or, rather and increasingly, face-to-face-to-mobile-phone-face, since people are ever more likely to include the mobile phone as a participant in what would otherwise be a face-to-face dyad or small group, and even parties.

On the other hand, those who treasure respite may find themselves pressured to replace otherwise excusable isolation with productive tasks. Once upon a time, being aboard an airplane excused an executive from having to interact with colleagues. No more, for the fax and phone now follow even at six miles high; nor are the seashore and mountaintop immune to their reach. An age of perpetual contact, at least in terms of potential, is dawning.

Neither should we underestimate the mobile phone's ability to help effect large-scale political change. Having recently become wildly popular in Manila, mobile phones were instrumental in organizing public pressure in response to personal corruption charges that forced Philippine president Joseph Estrada from office in January 2001. Throughout 2000,

anti-Estrada text messages, such as hostile slogans and satirical jokes, were aggressively propagated over the system. One government response was to encourage citizens to "just turn their cell phones off" (Brown, 2001). As the crisis intensified, anti-Estrada leaders began using "phone trees" to quickly organize massive demonstrations against Mr. Estrada. When riot police would maneuver to contain demonstrators, protest leaders would use mobile phone messaging to redirect the crowds. These efforts culminated with the ouster of Mr. Estrada. When he was arrested for "plundering the public treasury" a few months later, Mr. Estrada spent his first few hours in jail giving lengthy interviews to television stations – via *his* mobile phone (Chandrasekaran, 2001, p. A3). The mobile phone, a quintessential instrument of two-way interpersonal communication, can also work as a tool to spur and coordinate the actions of masses for political change.

Scholarly lacuna

Given the ever-expanding changes enabled by the ever-shrinking mobile phone, it is high time to give the subject concentrated scholarly attention. Yet, despite billions of dollars and hours spent on mobile communication, there is but slight academic interest in the social aspects of these processes. To fill this disquieting void we have assembled leading and rising scholars to analyze and report on the changes mobile communication has wrought in the way people conduct their lives and relationships. This volume presents their research findings.

Our investigation proceeds along three avenues. First, we want to see how the mobile telephone as a technology has been affecting people's lives. We wish to specify at several levels across ten cultures what these changes are and what they portend. Second, we see that the mobile telephone as a technology can sharply illuminate human behavior. The novelty of mobile phone technology, and its intrusive power into people's lives, allow us to observe aspects of the human communication process that would otherwise escape our attention, or at least be extremely difficult to discern. Finally, we introduce a new communication term to describe the mobile communication phenomenon.

Mobile communication technologies are already modifying well-established communication patterns, amplifying and substituting for them. Indeed, even creative and unanticipated uses are proliferating, with consequences for the pace and content of all walks of life. There has been a rapid and continuing merging of formerly separate modalities of mediated communication. These include the Internet, the telephone, portable computers, personal digital assistants, radio broadcasting, wireless and

4   *James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus*

infrared technologies, digital audio and video, and, traditionally, paper. The last time a communication technology had such a large effect on so many people was nearly a half-century ago when commercial television was introduced; as we will note next, a legitimate question is whether the mobile phone will surpass TV. What is not a question, though, is that for many, especially those outside the United States, the consequences of mobile communication dwarf that of the Internet.

More popular than TV

Comparative international statistics convey the magnitude and speed of these changes and the growth of the mobile phone. As the estimates in figure 1.1, suggest, people worldwide are more likely to own a telephone
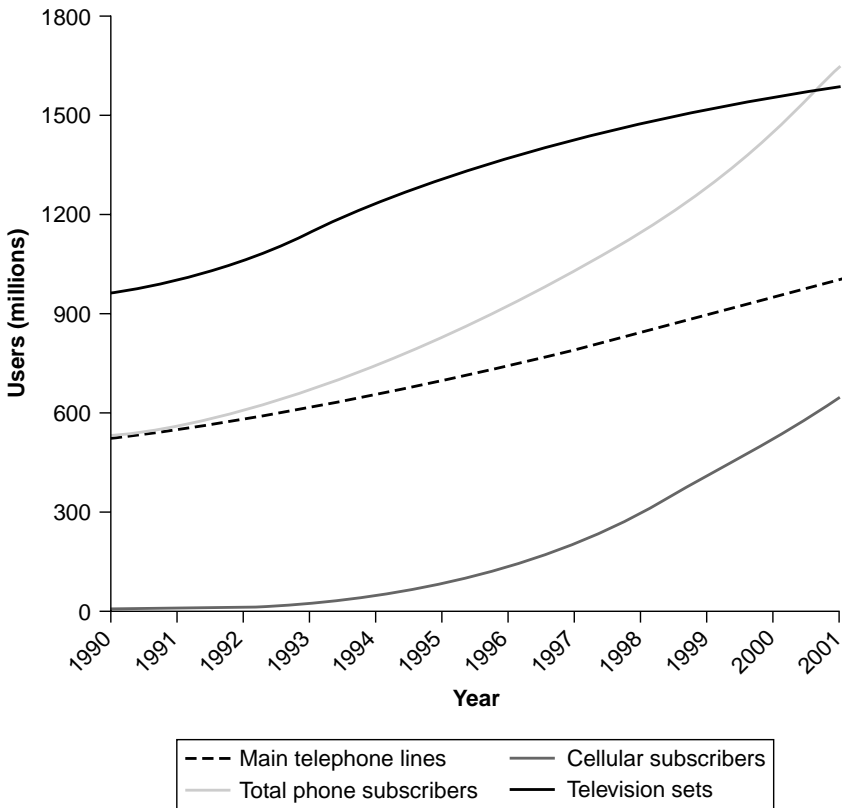

Figure 1.1 Worldwide ownership of telephones and mobile phones vs. TV. *Source:* World Telecommunication Development Report, cited in *Communication International* (November 1, 1999).

Table 1.1 *Estimates of mobile phone ownership, 2001*

Region	Penetration rate (%)
"Four tigers" (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan)	72.4
Western Europe	72.1
Japan	53.4
Australasia	49.6
North America	42.7
Latin America	15.6
Middle East	12.1
Central Europe	8.6
Rest of Asia	4.2
Africa	3.2

Source: Financial Times, June 14, 2001, p. 26.

than the more celebrated "miracle" of communication technology, the TV. These figures bolster our position that the mobile phone is indeed a revolutionary technology in terms of its ramifications for individual lives and social organization, both formal and informal.

In terms of penetration rates, table 1.1 clearly shows that the Northern European nations have some of the world's highest rates. These were among the earliest countries to have mobile phones available. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, the mobile phone has indeed transformed life in these societies. However, the question of early availability might not alone be enough to explain the uptake of mobile phone technology.

The economic profile of the mobile phone, or, more specifically, the cost per minute of usage, appears to be an important predictor of its mass penetration rate. Figure 1.2 shows the correlation between the cost per minute for mobile phone use and its penetration. Correlation does not mean causation, and there are obviously other variables that help account for both penetration rate and cost. These include the cost of handsets, population dispersion, the gross national product of the society and the extensiveness of service availability. However, it is known that consumer behavior of other "utilities" such as natural gas for home heating is strongly influenced by metering and awareness of unit consumption and pricing. So it is not much of a stretch to argue that the consumer cost awareness of the per minute pricing plans of the service provider, along with a consumption meter (such as is displayed on most mobile phones), would lead to users being exquisitely sensitive to price. This is all the more the case since, in our surveys, of those who have dropped their service for mobile phones excessive bills caused by inattentive consumption
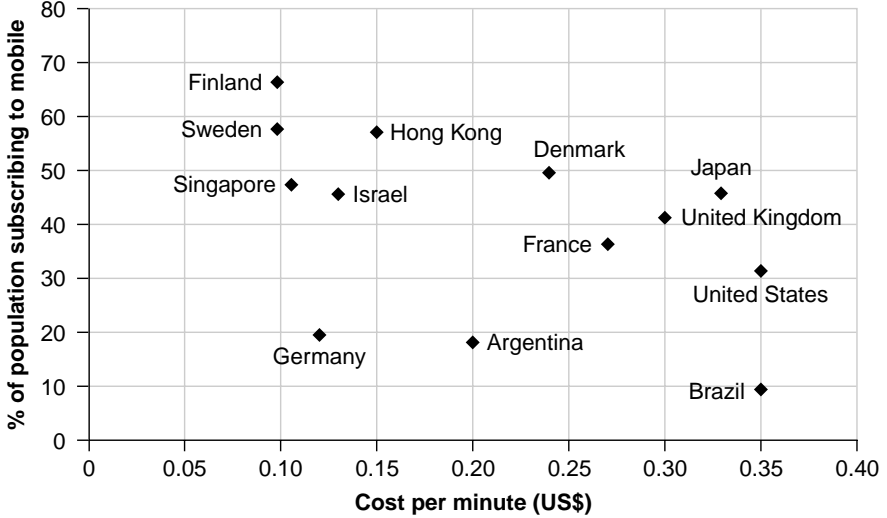
6   *James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus*

Figure 1.2 Penetration rates and cost per minute of mobile phone use, by country. *Sources:* D. Wilson, "The Future Is Here. Or Is It?" *Scientific American* 283 (October 2000): 50–51. Based on International Telecommunication Union, European Commission, eMarketer, and national telecom agencies and carriers.

of minutes is frequently mentioned as a reason for terminating service. Thus price would seem an attractive explanatory approach. One consequence of this argument is that, if costs per minute continue to decline at their historical rates, the worldwide proliferation of the mobile phone will accelerate over the near-term.

Framing the mobile phone

As a result of the mobile phone's extensive impact, rich stores of everyday discourses have accreted about the meaning of the mobile telephone for individuals and society. These discourses are visible in the wide range of accounts exchanged about the mobile telephone, especially regarding social etiquette. Whether these accounts concerning mobile phones are made in personal complaints, news stories, or advertisements, they serve an epideictic function. An epideictic function, as Aristotle wrote, is the use of speech to prove a person and their possessions or actions as worthy of honor or censure (Aristotle, 1954, pp. 31–33). Epideictic discourse stands in contrast to forensic discourse, which is the use of speech to determine what happened (Fahnestock, 1993, p. 19).

One might be tempted simply to ignore epideictic discourse that occurs in everyday cultural expressions made by ordinary people (referred to as "folk") about the mobile telephone and seek instead the directly revealed insights of topical forensic discourse experts. But, in terms of contemporary discourse about mobile communication, we discern a puzzle: folk views are abundant in observations and explanations, whereas expert discourse is relatively impoverished.[2] This puzzle is not a barrier to understanding the mobile telephone but an opportunity to formulate new grounds from which to explain the mobile communication phenomenon, in particular, and the tools humans invent to communicate, in general. The points of controversy potentially reveal more general, yet inchoate, philosophy about technology and communication common to the participants in the epideictic discourse about mobile telephones. Based on our focus group research and interviews, we can suggest some lines along which an inquiry might proceed.

The everyday epideictic discourse about the mobile telephone suggests a struggle to make sense of mobile communication and the technology that makes it possible. The contest over the meaning of the mobile telephone invokes well-formulated and nascent folk theories about the purpose and consequence of mobile communication and points to broader contest over the material and ideological condition of communication in contemporary societies. If the contest about the meaning of the mobile phone in everyday life contains dramaturgical elements, our goal is to articulate the staging, the framing, that makes the drama possible. We turn to the folk and expert framing of the mobile telephone.

Folk framing

Mobile telephones are praised, on the one hand, as devices that will liberate individuals from the constraints of their settings. Individuals who master these devices are shown as people who control their destiny. Stories circulate that focus on how people manage the contemporary demand to

---

[2] The situation in terms of expert discourse is, happily, improving. Two recent studies addressed the status symbol function of the mobile phone. The first (Lycett and Dunbar, 2000) looked at it in terms of displays and other manifestations of mobile phone ownership and use in a pub. The authors called this "lekking" behavior (a lek is an area where male members of a species congregate for elaborate courtship displays, while females observe performances to choose a mate). A second study (Charlton and Bates, 2000) claimed, on slender evidence, that mobile phone usage was a substitute for achieving the social recognition earlier conferred by cigarette smoking. Thus, the authors argued, as mobile phone usage among teens rose, cigarette smoking declined. Neither study was particularly persuasive, but the international press attention they received should spur further intellectual inquiry.

be in multiple places at one time or to simultaneously serve multiple roles
and present multiple faces. These stories heap praise and honor on those
who pull off such an elegant performance through the use of technology.

One theme in accounts about the mobile phone concerns its role as an
instrument for managing practical affairs. The mobile phone is praised
as a means to handle or avoid the emergencies and crises that otherwise
disrupt the smooth flow of everyday life. Within this view, the mobile
telephone is a tool that forestalls tragedy or tragi-comedy. For instance,
one family, who lives on a farm on the northern plains of the USA, used
a cell phone to dispatch emergency services when the father suffered
a heart attack while working by himself miles from the nearest person
or wire-telephone. The cellular industry gave members of the family a
free trip to Washington D.C. where they recited their story to industry
stakeholders and the press (*The Fertile Journal*, 1999). Less dramatically,
the mobile phone is praised as a means to facilitate the planning and
coordination of everyday matters. It is also a means to "be in touch" to
offer socio-emotional support. One of the common uses mobile telephone
users report with praise involves one family member simply checking in
on another to find out "how it is going" or to report that "I'll be home in
a few minutes." The praise thus draws attention to the mobile telephone
as a means for friends, family, and other social networks to retain accessi-
bility when they would otherwise be isolated from each other. Sometimes
individuals, particularly men, even cite the belief they earn "points" in
the relationship for having done so.

Mobile telephones are blamed, on the other hand, as the cause or
catalyst of the loss of control over life. The mobile telephone, in these
accounts, is often dramatized as a means to victimize people, thus robbing
them of their humanity. The ability of people to manage the access others
may have to them is a central premise upon which blame is formulated.

One theme in accounts about the mobile telephone concerns how the
mobile is implicated in the loss of control over one's accessibility and the
subsequent acceleration of the erosion of the public–private distinction.
The mobile phone is blamed in the loss of leisure. A recent news story
reported on a man who, while vacationing at Yellowstone Park, hooked
up a pay phone to his personal computer. He did this "just to be in touch"
with his office. An implication of the news story is that a mobile phone
with wireless Internet access could have circumvented this situation. Yet,
the story itself was told to portray the man as a depraved, communica-
tion junkie seeking his next fix. Rather than creating more time or better
use of available time, the phone is seen to usher in an ever more quick-
ened and hectic pace to life. In other cases, the blame highlights how
people are victims of others' excesses. People report frustration when

one person's chat and talk with an absent other via the phone spills over into the public arena. News accounts report rules established against mobile telephones in public arenas such as restaurants and theaters. These accounts dramatize how public space is destroyed, and even colonized, by private talk that interferes with ongoing interactions or that prevents spontaneous public interaction. Finally, the images of the mobile phone and related services portrayed by industry and marketers are seen to be false images of technology use that only spur consumption. The blame then emphasizes how the mobile telephone is an opportunity for the loss of control over contact and accessibility with others.

The struggle in folk discourse about mobile telephones and mobile communication signals a contest over deeper issues about sociality such as openness, availability and access. Indeed, the struggle to gain access and prevent access to one's self appears to animate social and technical innovations (Hopper, 1992).

The accounts about the mobile telephone tend to fix either praise or blame on the purpose and consequence of mobile communication, yet these accounts also depend on similar presumptions about communication and technology. The virtue and vice people find in the availability of the mobile telephone and its uses represent concerns about control over the new degree of contact and availability the mobile telephone makes possible. The praise and blame offered about mobile communication are generated concerning the mobile phones' facilitation or obstruction of a presumed natural progression of humans toward the ideal of open, transparent communication. The praise heaped on the mobile phone and its elegant use suggests that the good person communicating well maintains both contact and availability. Yet, the mobile telephone is also a foil in this teleology. The blame heaped on the mobile telephone or its dishonorable use suggests that a person is bad and communication is poor when a person is prevented from being an open, authentic communicator. The judgments are generated from a philosophy about humans and communication that embraces the Romantic image of Rousseau's natural man. The judgments about the technology stem from its transparency and presumed non-interference with human communication.

Expert framing

What the folk have noticed the experts are missing. The mobile telephone, and mobile communication, are now sufficiently prominent for the intellectual community to see them as consequential in understanding communication behavior. Moreover, new forms of communication behavior do not eliminate the problem of each form; yet saying there is no change

to daily life is contrary to commonsense and fact. It is worth understanding how lives are changed because of the mobile phone and, therefore, it is important to have technology in a theoretical picture.

Theories about communication ignore technology, except as a mass medium. Even in mass media studies, there is traditionally a preoccupation with media effects. Upon reading literature on communication technology, one might think that communication technology is a television or a personal computer linked to a network. Further investigation would lead one to think that the purpose of technology is to deliver entertainment packaging or to make organizations more efficient and effective. In this connection, we would also point out that mobile phones are in a transitional state, their status in public and the norms governing its use still transmogrifying – as is evident in the folk framing.

The mobile telephone is a technology that can sharply illuminate human behavior. Yet with notable exceptions – such as Hopper (1992), Fischer (1994), and, of course, Schegloff (see the Appendix to this volume) – experts have largely ignored the telephone and in particular the mobile phone. There are at least two important reasons for this theoretical situation. First, the media of everyday life, in particular the phone and mobile phone, are neglected as material to the conduct of everyday action. Although the telephone has assumed a central role in contemporary life, even Goffman, arguably the most astute observer of the routine and the mundane, seldom talked about the phone. Thus, the problematic ordering of behaviors is taken for granted. Second, the sociology of knowledge regarding communication makes it difficult to engage the scholarly community of people interested in communication. It appears that the experts have difficulty discovering and interpreting even the communication taking place right in their own ears. Save for computer-mediated communication, little interest is devoted to personal communication devices. This emphasis raises questions too. Why, for instance, have fewer than five articles been published over thirty years in the scholarly literature on the communicative aspects of Citizens' Band radio when millions use it each day? In stark contrast, more than an average of five articles are published daily on computer-mediated communication.

A new perspective and a new term: the convergence of the folks and experts

On the one hand, the folk framing and empirical evidence show the importance in daily life and human meaning of the mobile and other personal communication technologies (PCTs). On the other hand, the theorists whose job it is to give us social analytic tools to explain and predict human behavior have been as reticent on the subject as the public has been