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Edited by James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus

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## Perpetual Contact

The spread of mobile communication, most obtrusively as cell phones but increasingly in other wireless devices, is affecting people's lives and relationships to a previously unthought-of extent. Mobile phones, which are fast becoming ubiquitous, affect every aspect of our personal and professional lives either directly or indirectly. They have transformed social practices and changed the way we do business, yet surprisingly little serious academic work has been done on them. This book, with contributions from the foremost researchers in the field, will be the first study of the impact of the mobile phone on contemporary society from a social-scientific perspective. Providing a comprehensive overview of mobile phones and social interaction, it comprises an introduction covering the key issues, a series of unique national studies and surveys, and a final section examining theoretical and practical implications.

James E. Katz is Professor of Communication at Rutgers University. His publications include *Congress and National Energy Policy* (1984) and *Connections: Social and Cultural Studies of the Telephone in American Life* (1999). Katz has authored more than thirty peer-reviewed journal articles; his works have been translated into five languages and republished in numerous edited collections.

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# Perpetual Contact

*Mobile Communication, Private Talk,  
Public Performance*

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*Edited by*

James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002  
Reprinted 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Plantin 10/12 pt.    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Perpetual contact: mobile communication, private talk, public performance /  
edited by James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus.

p. cm.

ISBN 0 521 80771 9 (hbk) – ISBN 0 521 00266 4 (pbk)

1. Cellular telephones – Social aspects. 2. Wireless communication systems –  
Social aspects. I. Katz, James E. II. Aakhus, Mark, 1964–

HE9713 .P47 2001  
302.23'5 – dc21 2001043082

ISBN 0 521 80771 9 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 00266 4 paperback

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Ronald E. Rice  
*Primus inter primos*

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Dr. James Katz is the author of several books in the field of technology and society. His latest book, co-authored with Ronald E. Rice, is *Social Consequences of Internet Use*, published by MIT Press (Cambridge, MA) in 2002. His 1999 book, *Connections: Social and Cultural Studies of the Telephone in American Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers), was included in the 37<sup>th</sup> “Outstanding Academic Titles” award, given by the American Library Association’s journal *Choice*. His book *Congress and National Energy Policy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1984) was nominated for the American Political Science Association Gladys Kammerer prize for best political science publication in 1984. Another of his recent books, co-edited with Ronald E. Rice, is entitled *Internet and Healthcare Communication* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000). In 2000, he won the Rutgers Department of Communication Researcher of the Year award. Katz has authored more than thirty peer-reviewed journal articles; his works have been translated into five languages and republished in numerous edited collections.

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## Preface and acknowledgments

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Stopping at a Princeton, New Jersey, construction site, we half-consciously summarized the communicational situation. Before quite realizing it, we found in that buzzing, blooming confusion we could readily spot the person in charge. He was a man in his late 40s nestling a mobile phone in his meaty fist. The mobile phone was not what tipped us off – most workers at the site had cell telephones or pagers dangling from their belts. The boss carried his in his hand, its stubby antenna poking forward like an extra digit.

What you wear, and how you wear it, is a powerful form of communication. In this case, the boss's unconscious positioning of his communication device relative to his body was wonderfully indicative of his status and power. By otherwise occupying his hand with a mobile phone, he showed he had no intention of picking up a tool or performing manual labor. He used the phone's abbreviated antenna to point and gesture, in the manner of a nineteenth-century English army officer using his riding crop to dictate who needed to go where and do what.

The boss was also presumably more likely than his workers to be receiving a phone call, and thus needed to have his phone at the ready; the others, requiring it less often, could make do with a fumbling recovery from their belts. By having his telephone so primed for action, the boss could summon whatever manpower, materiel or expertise the project might require. Thus his cell phone also served as the symbolic equivalent of an ancient Egyptian overseer's whisk: others would be doing his bidding.

A few days later, strolling through the village green in Morristown, New Jersey, we caught a sidelong glance of a man sitting on a park bench. Like the foreman, he also looked to be in his late 40s. Unkempt, his gaze was fixed firmly on the horizon. Although by himself, he was nonetheless talking animatedly in a too-loud voice. Other passers-by, we noticed, inflected their path so as to provide him a wide berth. We did likewise. After transiting to his other side, we glimpsed backward nervously to see whether we could discern the telltale cord running from his ear to

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disappear beneath his clothes. Under the bulky sweatshirt, one hoped, the cord would connect to a cell telephone. Such a tether would allay our anxiety, allowing us to slacken our pace. Without it, we'd want to maintain our speed.

These two New Jersey vignettes encompass many of our themes. They include symbolism, power, order and command, issues reflected in the first vignette. Other themes, encapsulated in the second vignette, are the choreography of interpersonal communication, negotiation and maintenance of the social order, as well as the regulation of conversational interaction and self-presentation.

The disheveled man in the park was emblematic of the problem societies had been facing for millennia. Was this person in contact with a distant sentience or simply out of touch with quotidian reality? If the former, in historical times the individual would be a powerful and important religious figure. If the latter, an object of disdain. Nowadays we generally assume that such pre-Industrial Age "long-distance callers" never did have anyone at the other end of the telepathic line, whereas we give benefit of doubt that today's "plugged in" mobile phone users do.

Indeed the power to converse instantaneously and comfortably across vast distances was once a power reserved in human imagination only for the greatest gods. By contrast, today people with a few dollars can, from any geographically favored place, avail themselves of this ability. Hoi polloi of the twenty-first century enjoy ease of communication (not to mention physical comfort) far beyond the ken of the nineteenth century's richest potentate.

Our book is about how this godlike power is used by those who are far less than angels. We look at how people's lives are different now that copper tether and monopolistic tariff no longer constrain communication-at-a-distance. We also assay how organizations and societies, or, more precisely, social arrangements in physical space, have become transformed as a result of people exercising these powers. It is about how the internal psychological feeling of being accessible or having access changes social relationships. We want to understand how the "life feel" of the lived experience may be altered owing to the availability of this technology.

Yet we also want to know what has not changed. Like the construction site boss, people still need to arrange their lives so important tasks can be coordinated and executed. They still must struggle for a place in the social hierarchy, for money and economic resources and for control of their social environment. They want to express their will and sustain and nurture their social connections. To explore these issues we use several analytical perspectives that focus on the levels of national social

Cambridge University Press

0521807719 - Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance

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structures, comparisons across cultures, social interaction rituals and the choreography of communication. We also seek to understand how these tools in turn can be used to gain insight into the human communication process.

To avoid confusion and disappointment, it is important to note what this book is *not* about. It is not an analysis of the technology underlying the mobile phone industry or of its economic and marketing aspects. Nor is it about the safety aspects of mobile phones (such as are entailed in questions of their contribution to highway accidents or brain cancer).

A few comments about the book's genesis: most papers herein were first presented at a workshop convened at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, December 9–10, 1999. We think that this was the first international workshop aimed at codifying what is known about the social aspects of mobile communication on national cultural or comparative bases. Participants saw the endeavor as first steps towards building a multidimensional conceptual framework and outlining what is known and what needs to be learned about the social aspects of mobile communication. This volume is the first fruit of that gathering.

One cannot create an edited book without also creating a substantial intellectual debt. In our case, though, our profligacy and shameless imposition on colleagues could rightfully land us in intellectual debtor's prison. By no stretch can we discharge that debt here, though we can at least acknowledge it.

A crisp salute is due the excellent colleagues of our Department of Communication at Rutgers since they have helped create a positive intellectual atmosphere that encourages endeavors such as the "Perpetual Contact" exercise. Brent Ruben, Linda Lederman and Lea Stewart continuously work to foster a cooperative intellectual environment. They, like we, want the Department to be always a unit that conducts original research and produces heuristic insights. We also appreciate the judicious leadership of our colleague, Gustav Friedrich, who in his role as Dean cultivates these goals throughout the entire School of Communication, Information and Library Studies. Our gratitude goes as well to Vice President for Academic Affairs Joseph J. Seneca, whose fair-minded and astute leadership helps maintain Rutgers' position as an internationally recognized institution of higher learning.

As to the workshop itself, several departmental colleagues were instrumental in its success. Hartmut Mokros, then chair, encouraged us to hold a conference. He exerted himself tirelessly to encourage creative thinking throughout the Department. Jenny Mandelbaum gave generously of her

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time and sapience as unofficial senior counselor to the workshop, and lent important assistance at every turn with wry humor and efficiency. Ron Rice served as a conduit to what can verily be said was a worldwide talent pool. Additionally he helped provide an intellectual context for our activities and contributed mightily thereto both during and after the conference.

Among our workshop contributors, Richard Ling was our first recruit; he heartened us with his enthusiasm and assiduousness. Another early supporter was Enid Mante, whose dedication and thoughtfulness were important elements in the conference's overall success. Emanuel Schegloff provided us with our keynote address, and bestowed upon us manifold insights and constructive advice. His comments helped delineate and clarify our discussions; he also politely but firmly encouraged us to move in a heuristic direction. He is an important figure in the social study of the telephone, having contributed to the classic volume on the subject, *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, edited by Ithiel de Sola Poole. Since he provided the first words to our conference gathering via the keynote, it is also appropriate that, as the reader shall see, to him goes the volume's the last word.

We greatly appreciate the acuity and energy of colleagues who by their presence and papers allowed us to consummate the workshop. They are: Stephen Duck, Akiba Cohen, Chantal de Gournay, Leopoldina Fortunati, Shin Dong Kim, Christian Licoppe, Dawn Nafus, Jorge Quitogui, Sheizaf Rafaeli, Pirjo Rautianinen, Kathleen Robbins, James Rule and Amit Schejter.

We also thank those who, though unable to attend the workshop, were still kind enough to formulate their thoughts in writing. Their efforts greatly expanded our understanding and have also yielded thoughtful papers. These scholars include Kenneth Gergen, Jean-Philippe Heurtin, Eija-Liisa Kasesniemi, Jukka-Pekka Puro, Daphne Raban, Berit Skog, Georg Strøm, Karina Tracey, Martha Turner, Valentin Varbanov and Birgitte Yttri.

We were ably assisted during the workshop by a cadre of top-flight students. They included June Anibogu, Susan Bagley-Coyle, Jo-Tzu Chi, Victoria Kozol, Liliana Pinilla, Jeannie Rodriguez-Diaz, Peter Alexander Stepman and Angelica Weber.

Irving L. Horowitz, Barry Wellman and William H. Dutton provided acute comments on the manuscript. Mauricio Arango, Richard Buttny, John T. Carey, Claude Fischer and Oscar Gandy, Jr., shared their valuable ideas generously and graciously. At the project's early stage, Bill Caldwell lent valuable guidance and expertise; he remains a unique inspiration

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in his selflessness and thoughtful efforts to build a better world. Sarah Caro and Gillian Dadd of Cambridge University Press were wonderfully supportive throughout the publication preparation process. To all these colleagues and friends we offer our heartfelt gratitude.

*New Brunswick, New Jersey*

J.E.K.

M.A.A.