

Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere¹

by

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Abstract

1 Introduction

The use of the mobile telephone in the public sphere is a common occurrence. We are growing more accustomed to other's use of the device and many of us use it ourselves. It is common to see people talking on their cell phones on street corners, in airports and restaurants and in virtually all other public spaces. The social achievement of this has not come without comment. Indeed, it has been the focus of intense discussions and various types of moral arguments.

Drawing on Goffmanian analysis of social settings, I examine this issue here. The case of the mobile telephone has provided insight into the machinations of society. It helps us to under-

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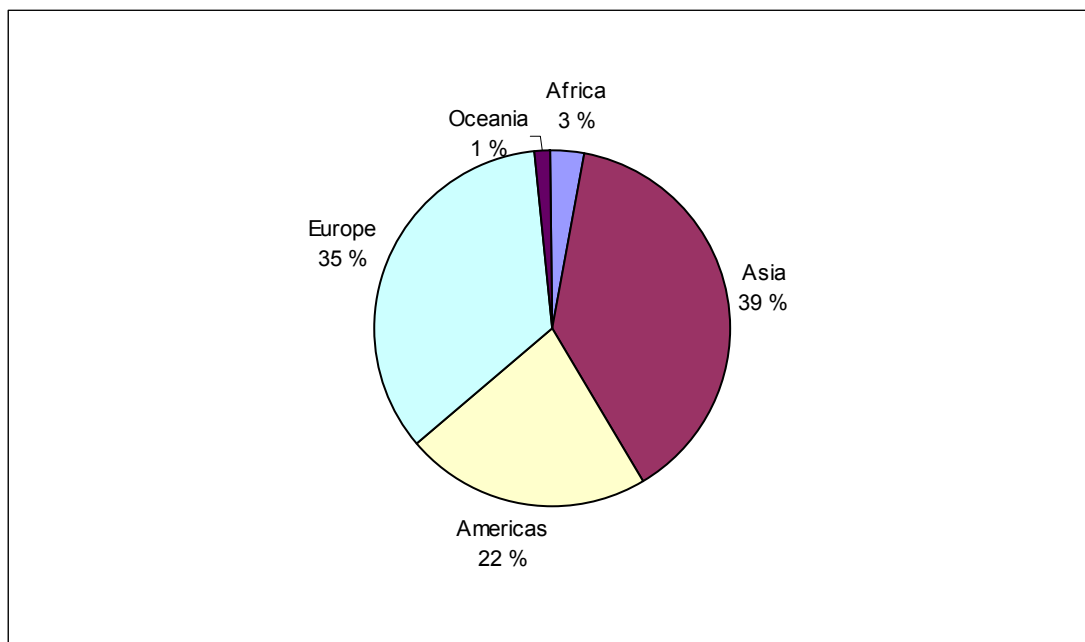
Ling, R. 2005. "Das Mobiltelefon und die Störung des öffentlichen Raums." in *Mobil Kommunikation: Perspektiven und Forschungsfelder*, vol. 115 - 134, edited by J. Höflich and J. Gebhardt. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

stand how society contextualizes and embeds innovations into our sense of the social order. Thus, while previous generations were confronted with the adoption of items such as the land-line telephone, the gramophone and the television, contemporary society is confronted with the mobile telephone.

The use of the mobile telephone has rendered many issues. In its use, one can see the ways in which we engage in façade management, the management of parallel front stages and how we strive to maintain a shared sense of the general context in spite of these potential threats. The device also shows how we engage in various forms of repair work both during and after the actual event. Thus, the mobile telephone gives us clues as to how we work to place new technologies into a surprisingly complex social context.



Mobile telephony has grown from a marginal technology to being a commonly used system during the past decade. According to material from the ITU, in 2002 there are about 19 mobile telephones for every 100 persons in the world. This compares to about 33 land-line telephones per 100 persons. In general terms, about 40% of the subscriptions are in the Asian countries, 35% are in Europe and the remaining 25% are divided between the Americas (22%) Africa and Oceania.

When looking at the adoption rates, Europe, as a whole has the highest rates. There are about 50 subscriptions per 100 persons in Europe. Oceania (48), the Americas (29), Asia/Middle East (12) and Africa (4) follow from there. Taiwan and Luxembourg come out at the top of the country rankings. There are a cluster of Scandinavian countries that have more than 80 subscriptions per 100 persons. Austria (83) and Germany (68) follow behind other countries. None-the-less they have higher adoption rates than Korea, Japan, the US etc.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

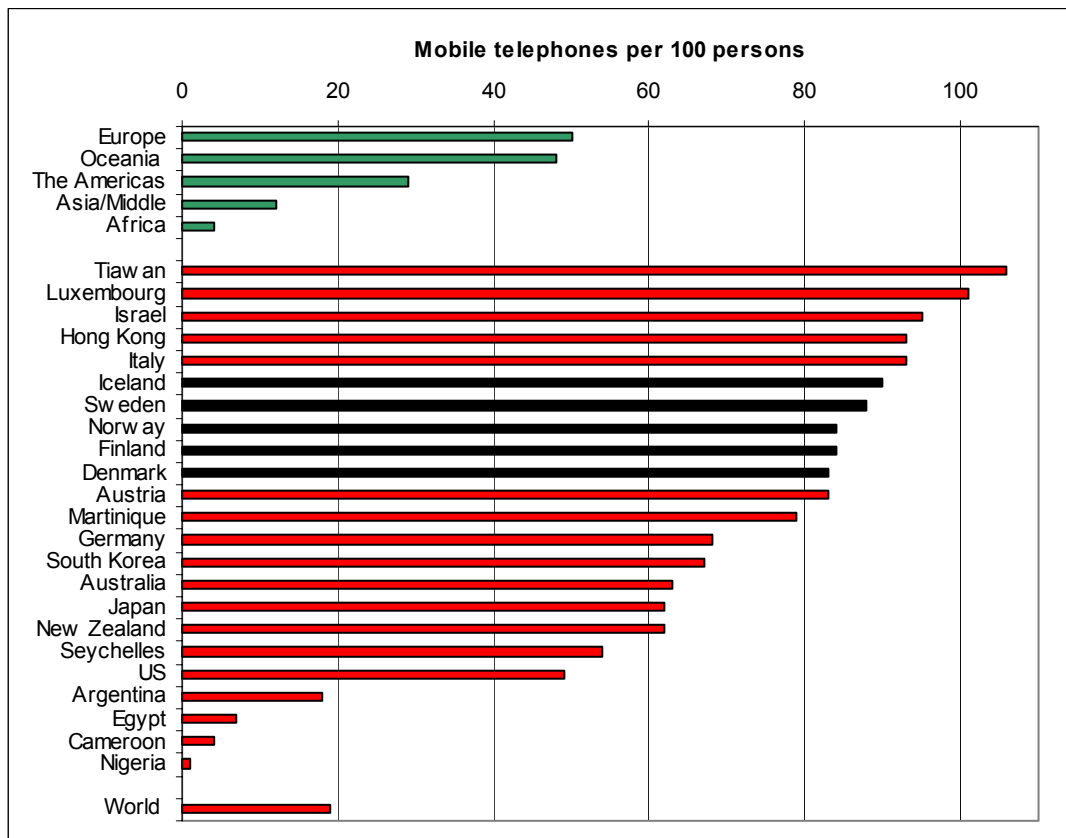


Figure 1 Mobile telephones per 100 persons in various countries. Source: ITU 2002

2 Method and theoretical background

2.1 Method

The work presented here is based on the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative material that has been gathered during the last 5 – 7 years. The qualitative material comes from a large number of group interviews as well as individual interviews and observational studies. Much of this material was gathered in Norway, but a significant effort included the analysis done in the Eurescom P903 project, a European-wide analysis carried out in 9 countries (Klamer, Haddon and Ling 2000; Ling, Haddon and Klamer 2001). In addition to the qualitative material, I draw on the quantitative data collection in the Eurescom P903 project. Specifically, I draw on the data gathered in the survey of 9 European countries that includes approximately 1000 interviews in each country that was gathered in 2000 (Mante-Meijer and al. 2001).

2.2 Theoretical background

When examining the question of how people use mobile telephones in the public sphere it is near at hand to draw on the work of Erving Goffman. His work, that draws on the observation and analysis of everyday ritual interactions is a fruitful point of departure. Goffman played on the analysis of ritual and ritual interaction as first suggested by Durkheim (1954). Goffman’s work provides one with the tools with which it is possible to glean insight from social settings, particularly when events dictate that things are going in an uncharted direction (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Goffman 1967; Goffman 1971). His insights into the use of

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

facades, posturing and the front/back stage distinction are of relevance when considering the recent arrival of mobile telephony (Fortunati 2003).

The mobile telephone, almost by definition, is a device that has the potential to impose itself into the physical setting in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. This means that there is always the potential that one must remove oneself from the here and now to deal with the telephonic pleas of another. It is in the context that Goffman's keen insights into the arrangement of social settings are of interest.

This is not to say that Goffman is above criticism. To read Goffman is to be charmed by a master author. However, one can at the same time assert, as does Giddens, that Goffman lacked much of what we call scientific rigor (1984, 68). Meyrowitz correctly suggests that Goffman's work can be seen as “a stylistic merger of the scholarly monograph and the novel” (Meyrowitz 1985, 32). None-the-less, both Giddens and Meyrowitz draw on Goffman in their analyses. Indeed Meyrowitz provides us with an exceptional analysis of the social role of the television couched in Goffmanian terms. Another critique includes the assertion that Goffman, in addition to the more general school of interactionists, do not adequately describe the reproduction of social structure on any broad scale. One can counter this assertion by noting that in Goffman there is the assumption of society's reflexive nature. That is, society is built up of a reservoir of mutually reflexive assumptions that one carries with them as they move through various social events.

A final criticism leveled against Goffman is the sense that, in some respects, he sees society as populated by cynical manipulators (Turner 1986, 459). This point is well taken. In reading Goffman one reads about individuals who erect facades, hide behind various types of masks and try to manipulate other's impressions of them by using various ruses and confidence games. None-the-less, these thumb-nail sketches are drawn to describe important social dynamics, just in the way that the economists' rational actor and the Skinnerian response machine are not meant to be complete individuals, but rather more-or less incomplete theoretical stick figures. Each is an invention to make a point. Goffman's creation is the same.

2.3 The two moments of mobile telephony

The mobile telephone is more than simply a communications device. If one examines it only in the light of its potential as a communication medium, one misses important aspects of the social consequences of the mobile telephone, namely its symbolic presence. Its potential as a communication medium must not be underestimated. Indeed, the mobile telephone has contributed to the ways in which we determine the safety or security of a situation and the way that one coordinates social interaction (Ling forthcoming). However, if one moves away from these instrumental activities, the mobile telephone is also a part of the way that one develops and displays their sense of identity (Ling and Helmersen 2000). In addition, the mobile telephone, and its use in the public sphere, has developed a type of social profile.

To draw on the work of Haddon, Silverstone and the domestication theorists, one needs to look beyond simple instrumental issues when describing the adoption of new technologies (Silverstone and Haddon 1996; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). Rather, it is important to look into how the various technologies and services relate to pre-existing social structures. Mobile telephones, for example, are, on the one hand simple communication devices. At the same

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

time, they are physical objects that take up space, are displayed, have a certain design and, by implication, make a statement about the person who owns and uses them. Silverstone et al. note that:

All technologies have the potential to be appropriated into an aesthetic environment (and all environments have, in some sense, an aesthetic). And many are purchased as much for their appearance and their compatibility with the dominant aesthetic rationality of the home as for their functional significance (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1992, 23).

Objects such as the mobile telephone enter into what Silverstone calls the “moral economy” of the home. That is, the object finds its place among the other artifacts that inhabit that sphere. It has to find its temporal space as well as its physical space. It has to find its correct role in the ongoing life of the individual and/or household. In addition, the object itself becomes a type of symbol. That is, one attaches meaning to the object and perhaps weaves this meaning into his or her own sense of identity.

Indeed, the mobile telephone can, in this respect be considered a type of jewelry – albeit a particularly unpredictable type of jewelry that can explode onto the scene at any moment – through which one displays their sense of self (Fortunati 2003). Like jewelry, it is an object that must be displayed or used at the appropriate time and in the appropriate way. Drawing on Goffman, this identity development is not simply done in isolation. The owner may have their version of the object’s meaning. At the same time, others who view the object vis-à-vis the owner also have a free hand in their interpretation of the device as well as its owner. While the owner may think that latest mobile telephone is simply the most elegant object one could have, the person viewing it can think that it is vulgar.

The adoption of objects such as the mobile telephone is, however, a conservative process. Adoption means that the object is mapped onto a pre-existing sense of the situation, and a pre-existing sense of the user’s daily routines. The adoption process means that the new artifact nuzzles its way into, and perhaps displaces other routines. Once the individual has found the space for the object, and once it has become a part of the individual’s identity in the eyes of others, there is certain crystallization. That is, the owner is perceived of as “the type of person who has a mobile telephone.” It is a part of their broader social profile. This is not to say that one cannot alter this. None-the-less, altering one’s profile requires the investment of time and effort.

3 Mobile telephones in the public sphere

Beyond being a device that can provide a sense of security, coordinate activities and communicate one’s status (Ling forthcoming), the mobile telephone is also often seen as a disturbance to the public sphere. It is common to hear complaints with regards to the disturbing nature of mobile telephony. Almost two thirds of the respondents in the EURESCOM p903 agreed with the statement that “The mobile telephone disturbs other people” (Mante-Meijer and al. 2001) Interestingly, experienced users were less likely to agree with this statement. Palen et al. report similar findings from the US (Palen, Salzman and Youngs 2001).

Respondents in qualitative research often display a repertoire of well-rehearsed formulations with which to describe other’s use of the mobile telephone in public spaces. This speaks to a broad sense that the use of mobile telephones has not found its proper place in the public sphere. We are only now starting to sort out the rules and etiquette of use. In addition, it uneven distribution of mobile telephones and the different experiences of use mean that our collective sense of how to deal with this issue is open for alternative interpretations.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

A sampling of comments from various group interviews includes the following:

It irritates me to go to airports and I think it is embarrassing and very pretentious and to sit there with that telephone. Sitting there with a cup of coffee with a man beside you with a PC in his lap. It simply irritates me. I think it is unreasonable.

Once [my husband] had [a mobile telephone] in to town and we were in the town and were shopping and right as we came out of a store the telephone rang. I thought it was very disgusting to stand there outside the store and talk and he thought he was going to be so big and because and I saw that. I think that was very disgusting.

Last week I was in a meeting and there were 10 or 12 in the meeting. Four of them had a mobile telephone. There was shuttle traffic out to the hallway. That is unacceptable.

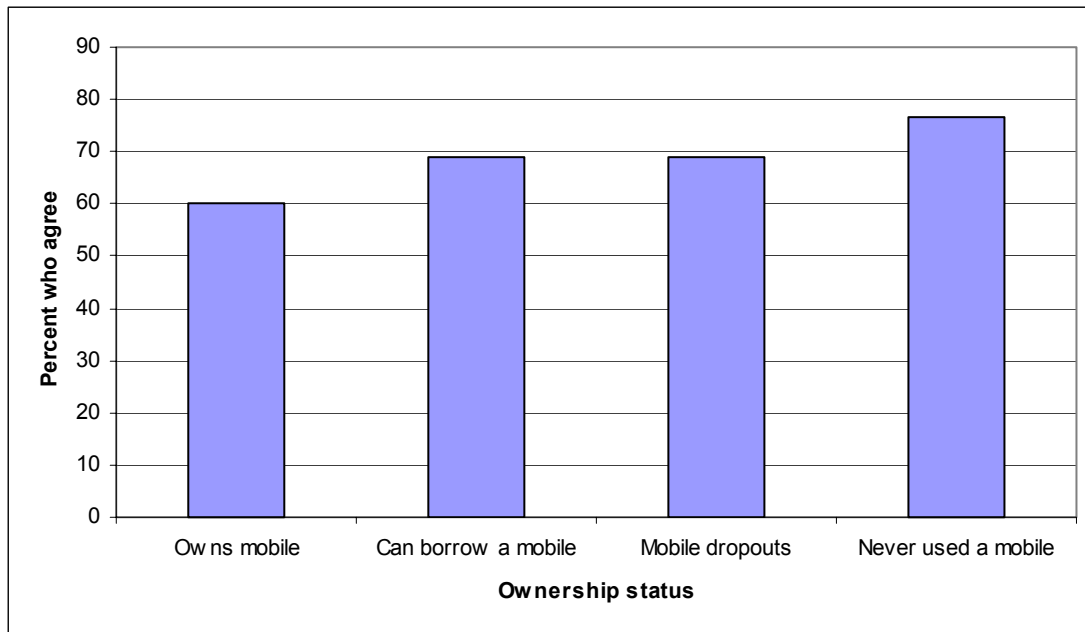


Figure 2 Percent of persons who agree with the statement “The mobile telephone disturbs other people.” The material comes from the pan-European EURESCOM p903 project and includes approximately 9000 respondents from 9 countries. The data was collected in 2000.

The comments give a voice to the more general sense that use of the device is disruptive. In addition, they go beyond simply noting the issue and they present examples of concrete situations wherein the mobile telephone has been used inappropriately. Here one sees the active use and development of a type of folk ideology. Not only is the basic attitude in place, but it is actively maintained and developed through the reciting of new instances.

3.1 Boundaries the public sphere

When moving in the public sphere, one observes certain boundaries vis-à-vis other persons. Indeed, we mark our relationship to others to a certain degree with the way in which we manage and use boundaries. According to Hall, one can distinguish between zones that are more intimate and those that are available in public settings (Hall 1973). These vary across cultures and across situations. Thus, in some countries it is acceptable for acquaintances to be in zones that would be only occupied by intimates in other cultures. Even within cultures, there

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

are variations between situations. For example, while the normal boundary for strangers may be beyond arm reach, sharing an elevator or a bus seat might mean that strangers must operate at closer range.

Another issue is the transient nature of the public sphere. One’s claim on space is only temporary and the range of space that one claims is likewise limited. Thus, our ability to stake a claim on a park bench, a bus seat or a table in a restaurant has characteristics that are not the same as those commonly found in the home (Lippman 1967; Silverstone and Haddon 1996; Mars and Nicod 1984). While generally we can only make transitory use of fixtures in the public sphere, it is indeed possible to develop a type of claim on a table or a park bench through habitual use. For example, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen patronized a specific table in the Grand Hotel in Oslo where he exerted a type of more general claim than one would normally expect in a restaurant. The same type of situation is found in countless local bars and restaurants. None-the-less the most common situation is that the patrons have only temporary right to use a location in the public sphere. Following Goffman:

Some [territories] are “situational”; they are part of the fixed equipment in the setting (whether publicly or privately owned), but are made available to the populace in the form of claimed goods while-in-use. Temporary tenancy is perceived to be involved, measured in seconds, minutes or hours, informally exerted, raising constant questions as to when it terminates. Park benches and restaurant tables are examples (Goffman 1971, 29).

Given the existence of temporary “ownership,” that is often within the range that one might otherwise consider their intimate sphere, there is the need to develop special rules and methods through which to manage the interaction (or the non-interaction) of those who are co-present. This can be done through use of the props that are available in the setting and it can be achieved through a type of unstated, but none-the-less commonly recognized agreement as to where the what one might say the symbolic fence line runs (Gullestad 1984).

In some situations, there are physical props that can be used to define the boundary between parties. At the lunch counter the place setting defines the locus of one’s field of action while a catsup bottle or one’s hat or newspaper might define the boundary. On the bus, one can often employ an armrest or, more expansively, place their bag on an adjacent seat in order to establish a symbolic boundary. These aspects of props and architecture can be used *ad hoc* to form boundaries that are obvious and that serve to separate parties (Goffman 1971, 33 - 34). There is also a class-based issue here. In those public places catering to more exclusive clientele, the hosts are attentive to the need for easily separated areas. One can contrast this to less exclusive situations where the clientele must take it upon themselves to divide up the available space. The exclusive restaurant vs. the stand up lunch counter and the differences between a first class and a tourist class seat on an airplane illustrate these issues

At another level, one can draw on kinesic or gestural resources when managing boundaries in the public sphere. We adjust our posture, manage our gaze and lower our voice when having to deal with others in close quarters. One Norwegian anthropologist has developed the notion of “managed unreachability” (Gullestad 1984, 167; see also Haugen 1983). That is, one assumes a certain aloof bearing that may seem cold and remote. However, according to the individual, it may be that by maintaining one’s public face, one is making a positive contribution to well-ordered public sphere. In a sense one is playing at a symbolic level out Robert Frost’s notion that “Good fences make good neighbors.”

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

Once these fences are in place, one has in effect established a type of private sphere wherein one can engage in personal activities. One can have a private conversation, read a book, take a nap, enjoy a snack or engage in a multitude of other quasi-private affairs.

Thus, we are presented with a paradox in these situations. On the one hand, we are carrying out our private lives on an open stage. We are engaging in private, indeed sometimes quite intimate conversations in very public places. Interestingly, we generally can carry it off. There is a type of broad willingness to provide each other with the seclusion we need in spite of the fact that we are being reclusive in the public eye. This said, one of the irritations of interaction in public places is that not everybody shares the same definition of the situation. The boisterous behavior of the teens in the park can upset the interaction between the two elderly women who are searching for composure and a quiet place to gossip a bit. The playing of noisy and insistent children can interfere with the tête-à-tête of two lovers who wish to exchange endearments. Another’s loud radio – or over-enthusiastic mobile telephone conversation – can disturb the elderly gent who wants to take a quick nap on a sunny day in the park. Thus, spending time in the public sphere means that one can usually count on a certain level of privacy, but the definition of privacy, and the way in which it is practiced can vary.

3.2 Face and face work in the public sphere

Another issue confronting one is the management of one’s “face” in public situations. A central aspect of Goffmanian analysis is the presentation of an internally consistent façade in various situations. While the specific façade may change from situation to situation, there is a particular need to have stability within a given situation. If one is at a formal ball, then one is expected to play out that role. If you are viewing art in an art gallery, others will be put off if you start to sing your favorite rock and roll songs. This is not to say that one has to be stiff in their performance. Indeed, the ability to play at the edge of a set of expectations is that which brings life to the setting. However, one must remain centered in the situation and not tip over into the norms and rituals associated with another. That is, we have to maintain the semblance of a “front” in a given situation, regardless of how false it might be.

Another issue here is that the maintenance of a face is not a solitary activity. Rather it is socially produced. The front that one projects is only as good as others’ willingness to accept it. Indeed, we watch after the facades of others in a situation and help or cajole each other to observe norms within certain tolerances (Goffman 1967, 7). As Goffman notes:

A person’s performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. Here is the hallmark of socialization. If he and others were not socialized in this way, interaction in most societies and most situations would be a much more hazardous thing for feelings and faces (1967, 31).

Thus, our sense of the face that we present in a given situation allows us to manage and adjust our perceptions of the situation. Our sense of the situation, along with the more or less gentle nudges we receive from others, helps us to collectively bring off social situations. These are not only formally convened situations, such as a dinner party or a meeting at work, but also the myriad of other social settings in which we interact, ranging all the way from riding in elevators to waiting in the reception rooms of dentists.

When discussing the management of façade in an earlier paper I noted:

If one considers a restaurant in this context, it can be seen as a dynamic stage upon which one’s facade is displayed. It is a special situation where one is asked to combine etiquette and social finesse. It is where

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

there is often a demand to celebrate social unity with one's family, friends or colleagues. At the same time there are many unexpected turns and twists that a restaurant visit can take. There is a well prescribed set of rules and rituals that must be observed – the correct use of utensils, the way in which one eats, the topics that are available for conversation, etc. There are many possibilities for personal adventure – meeting that special someone in a singles bar, closing an important deal, savoring a specially cooked meal, celebrating a birthday or other significant transition etc. Finally, there are many potential hazards – spilling the wine or the soup, making inappropriate remarks, the need to cover over the fact that one received a poorly cooked meal, having to deal with Uncle Fred after he has had too much to drink, meeting others who one had hoped to avoid in that situation, using the wrong knife and thus indicating unfamiliarity with “correct behavior” etc. (Chen 1990-91; Fine 1995; Giuffre and Williams 1994; Parker 1988). All of these demands require that one become fluent in the maintenance of face (Ling 1997).

Thus, one's successful presentation of self in social situations means that one has to have master a broad set of norms. In many cases these norms are quasi-codified rules of behavior know as etiquette or courtesy (Jackson 1952, 325; Duncan 1970, 266 - 69). The norms of eating, meeting and talking on the street, entertaining others in our homes and nearly all social situations include some sort of decorum. In addition, manners and etiquette include a consideration of status and status hierarchy. The order of introductions, the manner of address, the order of serving food and a thousand other behaviors all point to similarities and differences in status that one must consider. According to Geertz, etiquette is a reciprocally built barrier that surrounds the individual. Etiquette is a set of behaviors that protect one from the buffering of unexpected situations. Geertz also suggests that as one moves up the status ladder, “the thicker the wall of etiquette protecting the emotional life” (Geertz 1972, 290; see also Gullestad 1992, 165). Thus, our maintenance of face in public settings and our observation of manners or courtesy contribute to the gloss of the event and it is a reaffirmation of the social order.

3.3 Problems with using mobile telephones in public settings

Given this background, several dimensions of public mobile telephony are problematic. Indeed, it is common for respondents to make particularly evocative statements in this connection. One informant noted, “It is awful to see those who go around [using a mobile telephone], I could throw up!” Another said that it is “repulsive to sit there and talk with people on a mobile telephone in a restaurant.” Thus it is easy to see that use of the mobile telephone in the public sphere plays into deeply felt moral values.

It is often noted that the sounds associated with the mobile telephone are an infringement on the public commons. Goffman notes the role of sound as one way to violate the boundaries of personal space (Goffman 1971, 33 - 34, 51). In this way, fill up our quota of audible space and then some. When intruding into the audible sphere of others we run the risk of being sanctioned for our untoward behavior. Mobile telephony is often seen in these terms. The ringing of the device, the perception that one talks too loudly and the sense that one coerces others to eavesdrop on their conversations are all seen as intrusions on the public sphere. It is clear that the degree to which these disturbances are a real transgression depend on the setting in which they take place. The mobile telephone is less problematic in setting wherein one can expect informality of wherein there is generally a high level of background sound. Food court cafeterias, shopping centers, relatively open street settings and places where there is “white noise” in the background are often seen in this way. On the other hand there is less tolerance for mobile telephone in those situations where the common focus of attention is more focused (in movie theaters, churches or in restaurants where the social interaction is central) or in those situations where it is difficult to cover the audible traces of the mobile telephone conversation (in elevators or in tightly packed public transport).

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

Another issue that is problematic is the need for the person using the mobile telephone, in effect, to manage parallel front stages. Using the mobile telephone in the presence of others, in particular within a circle of friends or family, is a precarious situation. Both from the perspective of person making the call and for those who must await the completion of the call there is the need to move carefully.

3.3.1 Ringing

A common complaint concerning the use of mobile telephony in the public sphere is the ringing sound.

It is embarrassing, I am embarrassed when it rings in the bus for example. The sound is so loud and you are completely. . . No! (Jenny 25)

I have never liked the mobile telephone. . . but those people that sit there and play all those damn ringing sounds on the telephone and just do that. No, I just hate that you know. (Andre 28)

The fact that the device can spontaneously erupt into action means that all those around it must prepare to recast themselves into new roles. Conversations have to be put into pause mode, the person who’s telephone rings must fish around for the device and start the answering sequence, the erstwhile co-present persons have to quietly fade into the background while the telephonist has to prepare to deal with an parallel portion of his or her life.

The problem of ringing telephones can even transcend our attempts to cover over our use of the mobile telephone. As reported by Sonja, a university student:

In lectures for example, if you turn off the [ringing] sound then you can hear it anyway in the loudspeaker system and things like that. It makes a lot of noise. It is pretty irritating, at any rate for the one who is lecturing.

The ringing of the telephone places one at the risk of losing face. In general, we have developed various ways of dealing with quickly emerging situations that threaten our composure. One says ‘oops’ when stumbling on the rug or manages an embarrassed smile when caught making some or other gaffe.

Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own repertoire of face saving practices. It is to this repertoire that people partly refer when they ask what a person or a culture is “really” like. And yet the particular set of practices stressed by particular persons or groups seem to be drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices. It is as though face, by its vary nature can only be saved in a certain number of ways (Goffman 1967, 12 - 13).

It is in these situations that we draw on our reserves of poise and composure. Experience has provided us with a reservoir of techniques upon which we can draw – some of us have a larger reservoir than others. Dealing with the impending rudeness of mobile telephony is only now being included in this repertoire of devices. Excusing ourselves from the co-present fellowship, using various postures to in effect “duck” out of the circle of conversation, moving into the less trafficked portions of the area etc are all possibilities. These are used, in effect, to put the co-present interaction on hold until it can be resumed.

3.3.2 Talking loud and forced eavesdropping

In addition to the ringing sound, many feel that it is disturbing when others talk on the mobile telephone. One person noted “People talk loud on telephones. Louder than usual, at least. That is as annoying as having a loud party next to your table.” Another said: “When you have

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

a loud person talking into a [mobile] phone and you (can't help but) hear only half of the conversation, that disrupts the coziness of the restaurant feeling.” In other cases the topic may be judged to be superfluous as in the case reported by one informant “[The user of a mobile phone] yaks away about (obviously) trivial matters.” Regardless, the need to guard against hearing too much was reported to have been disruptive.

Part of this issue can be seen in that one replaces some visual gestures with “verbal gestures” when talking on the phone (Rutter 1987, 105, 126; Martin 1991, 95 - 97; see also Duncan 1972; Saks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974). In addition, there is the need to be heard over the background ambient noise. Finally, concentration on the telephone conversation means that the telephonist is less open to signals in the locale. Thus, it is relatively simple to hear the difference a co-located conversation and one that is mediated via the telephone. If at the outset one has the sense that that mobile telephony in public places is a breach in the decorum, these issues make it easy to identify infractions.

One can ask why it is problematic to hear the conversation of others. Here the issue of boundary management and eavesdropping arises. The common concern with eavesdropping is that others will overhear our secrets. However, the situation seems to take on a reflexive tone when considering the use of mobile telephony. In this case, the others in the context seem to fear that they will hear the intimacies of others. This issue was pursued in the following sequence.

Moderator: Say for example that I have an argument [on the mobile phone] with my wife on the subway or in a café or something like that, and I don't care what you think, but . . .

Kari: But it is really pretty irritating for others that are sitting there and have to listen.

Moderator: But why is that? I don't understand why people . . .

Kari: No, but if you sit there and you are on the subway, you do that, because if you sit there on one of those and there are two people that sit there and talk so it is real noisy you get tired of that.

Tom: Yeah, it is distracting and disturbing

Kari: Yeah, you know, it is that. Why can't people . . .

Moderator: But there is a lot of other sound there. People talk and there is the noise from the subway and stuff like that.

Kari: No it is not like that

Ida: No, it is not like others talking on the subway, no.

Ola: No, not like if other talk quietly with each other.

Kari: Quietly yeah, because you know people [with whom you are talking on the mobile telephone] hear worse when you go in a tunnel and they talk so loud in their mobile telephone and then strangest thing is that people don't care that it is private. They talk loud and they lay everything out. You know 'Yesterday I met him and it was . . .' you know. It is just awful and really irritating.

Moderator: But why is it irritating?

Kari: No, it is exactly that it is an irritation for the other people on the subway.

Moderator: But why is it irritating?

Marta: Why do other's have to push their private life onto us?

Kari: In a public place.

Marta: Can't we keep that to ourselves? There is something that is called ethical rules you know.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

These citations indicate that there are several reasons people do not like to hear mobile telephone conversations in public spaces. It is disturbing since it is loud and one only hears part of the conversation, one hears things that perhaps should be reserved for less public spaces and, as a type of summary, it is a breach of the “ethical rules.”

In a sense, there is a hierarchy of legitimations here. At the most basic level, overhearing a mobile telephone conversation is an inconvenience to the unintended audience. It perhaps distracts them from their own thoughts. At a second level, it puts the unintended listener into an awkward position vis-à-vis their access to the more but often less private² dimensions of the speaker’s life where “they lay everything out. You know ‘Yesterday I met him and it was . . .’ you know.” Forced eavesdropping reveals that there is a reflexive issue at play. This play goes something like: “If I can hear what they are saying, in another situation they might hear what I am saying.” That is reveals, at some level, an uncomfortable reflection of our own potential for being caught out in a similar way.

Finally, Marta’s comment that “There is something that is called ethical rules you know” trumps the citation sequence. In effect, she asserts that speaking about private things in a the public sphere is a breach of morals. This reformulates the issue and places it beyond the simple convenience of the individual or as a guard against uncomfortable reflections. In effect, she is saying that, in some small way, to engage in this activity is to pose a threat to the moral order. While it is not likely that this issue that will bring people to the barricades, there will have to be an accommodation.

3.3.3 The problem of parallel front stages

Another issue associated with the use of the mobile telephone in the public sphere is what I have referred to – in a play on the Goffmanian concept – as the management parallel front stages. On the one hand, the telephonist must be there for their telephonic interlocutor. At the same time, they need to maintain their façade vis-à-vis those who are co-present. In many respects, the conversation on the telephone often takes predominance and the individual withdraws to some degree from the physical context. The telephonist must determine which of the conversations will take precedence. Goffman refers to this as accreditation.

Messages that are not part of the officially accredited flow are modulated so as to not interfere seriously with the accredited messages. Nearby persons who are not participants visibly desist in some way from exploiting their communication position and so modify their own communication, if any, so as to provide interference (Goffman 1967, 35).

It can be problematic to manage two different situations simultaneously, particularly when there is a need to segregate the impressions that we foster in the alternative settings. It is often the case that the two audiences – that is our telephonic partner and our co-present partner(s) – generally have access to different dimensions of our lives. Indeed, it may be inappropriate for the telephonic partner – who may for example be a business connection – to hear that one is having a highly audible disagreement with their child regarding the color of socks that they will wear to soccer practice. The range of topics that are available to the two audiences, the passion with which they can be discussed and the emotional scale that is available in the two contexts can be quite different. The range of that which is “taken for granted” in

² One of the main uses of mobile telephony is the coordination of meetings and other activities. These are hardly the revealing intimacies that might cause one to blush.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

the different contexts varies (Garfinkle 1967, 35 - 85). This can lead to a certain post-modern character to the conversation.

The emerging courtesy in such situations is for the telephonist to temporarily physically move out of the co-present situation and complete the call. This will be discussed below. Another strategy is to allow those who are co-present access to our “back stage” life (Goffman 1959, 139). In this situation, the co-present person(s) are allowed to see the staging of a performance that is not necessarily intended for their consumption. At one level, this may not be problematic. However, if the telephonic performance strays too far from that façade that we are trying to develop in the co-present situation there may be the need for extensive repair work. The telephonist can manipulate this situation. They can distance themselves from the seriousness of the telephonic conversation by making side comments to the co-present individual or by using various gestures (winks, rolling one’s eyes etc.) to indicate that the telephonic performance is only an act and that the co-present person has access to genuine façade, as it were. None-the-less, this can be delicate work.

Thus, the public use of mobile telephony renders many issues. There is the need for various forms of façade management, both when the telephone rings and during the actual conversation when there is a type of parallel front stage. In addition, the use of the mobile telephone in the public sphere brings into question the construction of that arena. The breach in the order provides insight into how we must strive to place new technologies into an amazingly complex context.

3.4 Management of the mobile telephone in the public sphere

Once a breach in the decorum of the situation has happened – that is once the mobile telephone has rung – it is up to the participants to engage in what Goffman calls “face work.”

By face-work I mean to designate the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face. Face work serves to counteract “incidents” – that is, events whose effective symbolic implications threaten face. Thus poise is one important type of face work, for through poise the person controls his embarrassment and hence the embarrassment that he and others might have over his embarrassment (Goffman 1967, 12-13).

The recognition of one’s own embarrassment, and the reflexive recognition that others may also be embarrassed by the situation speaks to the degree that there is a common definition of the situation. Goffman notes that “one has an interest in a defensive orientation towards saving his own face and a protective orientation saving the face of others” (Goffman 1967, 14). Thus, we are likely to ignore minor infractions in the spirit of the occasion.

If the transgression goes beyond a certain limit, it is potentially more serious. In this case, the infraction can potentially threaten the situation and can insult our sense of identity. Somewhat in line with the comments of Marta cited above, Duncan goes further to suggest that the flagrant disregard of manners and courtesies is a threat to order.

Anger over ill manners of others arises out of the belief that not following our manners is a way of telling us that we are not really important in the eyes of the transgressor. We excuse a *faux pas* made out of ignorance (and soon corrected) because we still feel the importance of our manners as a social bond. We laugh at comic depictions of vulgarity so long as the majesty of what we hold important is not threatened. But we do not laugh at savage ridicule or continued vulgarity, because they endanger the social principle upon which our manners are based (Duncan 1970, 267).

Thus, there is a need for both the telephonist and those who are co-present to agree on the management of the situation.

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

3.4.1 The telephonist managing the breach to the situation

As noted above, upon receiving a call – or in the case that one must make a call – we can shield ourselves from the public. There are usually alcoves, entry halls and other less populated areas that are available for these purposes. Upon receiving a call, one can engage in an adroit resifting of the situation. They can excuse themselves from the restaurant table, or move to another portion of the park so that others are not put into the position of being within ear-shot. It also means that one must ask for forbearance on the part of the telephonic partner as one moves into a more appropriate situation.

Other strategies include muting the device so as to avoid its unexpected eruption onto the scene (Fortunati 2003). The mastery of these strategies is a part of the folk knowledge associated with the mobile telephone.

Moderator: What about disturbing others [by using the mobile telephone]

Nina (18): The movies.

Oda: (18): You turn it off in the movies or if you are in a restaurant and eat. You don't have the telephone on then.

Arne (17): I don't think that there is anybody who has a mobile phone that doesn't know the unwritten mobile rules.

Indeed there are various technical alternatives that are available with which one can facilitate this.

With my new mobile telephone I have it in my pocket, because I have the vibration on so I don't need to have it on ringing. [Usually] I have it in my brief case, but when I come in here I put it in my pocket so I don't have to have the sound on.

Finally, one of the advantages of SMS is that it is not as intrusive as other forms of telephonic interaction. Through the use of SMS one can communicate, and even carry out simplified conversations (Ling 2003).

3.4.2 Management strategies available to co-present persons

It is more interesting, perhaps, to look at the management strategies of co-present individuals. At one level there is the adoption of what Goffman calls civil inattention (1963, 85 - 86) and then there is the slightly more fixed and grim “studied non-observance.” In the case of simple infractions, we often turn a blind eye to the situation. The willingness to do this indicates that we place the need for a smoothly functioning the social setting above that of the potential threat of the emerging transgression.

We draw on our mastery of courtesy and strike a posed stance which displays our indifference to the violation. We might look out the window, turn away, more carefully gaze at our newspaper or use a multitude of other ruses. If the transgression becomes more intense, this game of ignoring the fracas may become more embittered, fanatical and studied.

As the mobile telephone becomes normalized we will likely need to develop a repertoire of suitable inattentive postures which we can assume. The point is that the enforced audience must balance their displeasure against their responsibilities to the general context. Despite the damage being done by others, we do not want to further disturb the scene.

The combined effect of the rule of self-respect and the rule of consideratness is that the person tends to conduct himself during an encounter so as to maintain both his own face and the face of the other partici-

“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

pants. . . . A state where everybody temporarily accepts everyone else's line is established. This kind of mutual acceptance seems to be a basic structural feature of interaction, especially the interaction of face-to-face talk (Goffman 1967, 11).

If the situation tips over so as to be unmanageable then one moves into the area of overt sanctioning. For teens in school, this might mean losing access to their mobile telephone during class. For subordinates in job situation this may mean being called onto the carpet. For persons in an audience (at for example a concert) it may mean being made an example of.

Beyond this, there is a growing body of urban legends describing the inappropriate use of mobile telephones in public places (Håberg 1997). The effect of these stories is to vicariously instruct others about the dangers of mobile telephone use in public. Thus, the recitation of stories wherein one is persecuted for their mobile telephone use is a way to distribute social learning and to engage in a type of preventative behavior.

4 Conclusion

In this paper based on the examination of focus group data, I have examined how people making sense of the inappropriate use of mobile telephones, particularly in restaurants. I have looked at the social meaning of mobile phones and restaurants. In addition, I have looked at how the use of the former in the latter presents both the user and others patrons with a difficult social situation. The analysis has drawn on the work of Goffman's notion of drama and staging in order to place the analysis in a larger framework. Goffman's concepts of social boundaries, face, front stage/back stage, civil inattention, studied non-observance and sanctioning via attribution have been used.

This paper is a further examination of the ways in which technology has shifted social boundaries. Devices such as the video telephone and Internet have meant that we need to reconsider how it is that we construct our social worlds. They have made demands on the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life. These developments mean that we can communicate in new ways at new times in new places. While there are unimagined possibilities there are also unimagined complications. In sorting these out we will starting to see technologies effects on power relations, gender and age differences.

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“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

Rich Ling, Ph.D.

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“Mobile telephones and the disturbance of the public sphere”

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