

Children, youth and mobile communication¹

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Biography

Rich Ling (Ph.D., University of Colorado) is a senior researcher at Telenor R&D and has an adjunct position at the University of Michigan. His interests include the social consequences of mobile telephony. He has authored *The mobile connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society* (Morgan Kaufmann, 2004), and along with Per Pedersen has co-edited *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Social Sphere* (Springer, 2005).

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Introduction

Teens are, perhaps the most consummate mobile telephone users. Teens have made text messaging into a common form of interaction. They have learned how to coordinate and indeed micro-coordinate interaction via the mobile telephone. They use the camera to share photos of enticing members of the opposite sex and to gather peer opinion on the color of potential clothes purchases. The mobile phone is a safety link, it allows for effective coordination, it is an object lesson in the use of money for teens and often, it is a reluctantly accepted umbilical cord to their parents and a central artifact of their self-image (Fortunati, 2001). At the same time the device has resulted in school bans, a new form of bullying and has opened a new front in the war against cheating during exams (May & Hearn, 2005). There are reports of mobile phone addiction in Korea (Park, 2003) and the extended use of mobile communication can impact on adolescents sleep (Van den Bulck, 2003)

When thinking of teens however, there are additional issues that are stirring. In many cases, the mobile telephone has become a tool in their emancipation from their home. This means that on the one hand it gives the child a source of interaction that is not mediated by parents – as is the case with the traditional landline telephone – and it also plays into the social cohesion of the peer group (Ling, 2004, 2006; Ling & Yttri, 2002).

Teens and the ebb and flow of social cohesion

Taking social cohesion as a point of departure, there is a broader discussion surrounding the impact of information and communication technologies on this aspect of society. According to Robert Putnam (2000), there is a general drift towards individualism in society, or at least in the US where he has done his work. Following Putnam this is at least partially to blame on the medium of TV. Following this theme social scientists such as Beck, Beck Gernsheim, Giddens and Lash have also examined the rise of individualism (2002;

1994). At the same time there are several researchers who have reported on the varying impact of the Internet on social cohesion. Some argue that it promotes social interaction (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) while others outline the negative impacts of the technology on social bonds (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). Thus, the jury seems to be out with relation to the impact of the Internet as has been historically the case with the introduction of each new communication medium.

There is, however, a growing body of research suggesting that mobile communication fosters at least informal social interaction within the immediate group of friends. Work done in Europe (Ling, Yttri, Anderson, & DeDuchia, 2003; Reid & Reid, 2004) and East Asia (Kim, 2006; Miyata, 2006) indicates that there is a covariance between mobile phone use and informal “strong tie” social interaction. Work by Licoppe (2004) in France suggests, for example, that mobile communication leads to tightly integrated small groups, or in other words cliques. The work of Choi in the US (2004), Abdullah in Malaysia (2004) Roessler and Hoeflich in Germany (2002) and our own work in Norway (2003; 2002) supports the idea that this is an important function particularly in the context of the innermost circle of friends and family.

Thus, on the one hand there is research saying that social cohesion is loosening when examining some technologies (the TV and perhaps some functions of the Internet) and tightening when looking at other technologies such as the mobile phone. This in turn lets us ask the question as to the optimal level of social cohesion, an issue that will be considered below.

The function of emancipation

This discussion can be seen against the backdrop of adolescence and teen emancipation, that is the process of moving out of the sphere of their parent’s home and into a

period of life where they are, more or less, responsible for their own affairs (Arnett, 2001; Genep, 1960; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Hogan, 1985). Adolescence is, of course, a period in which parents and teens go progressively in their separate ways. Parents have hopefully to provide teens with the ballast they need in life. However, there is a need to then let them cut their teeth on the various issues associated with being a well functioning adult. Thus, parents are concerned that their children have the resources and insight they need, but the teen is also often hell bound to establish him or her self outside the constraints of parents.

During the last decades we have seen the rise of a series of technologies that fundamentally change the way work is done, family life is coordinated, romancing is accomplished, schooling is survived, etc (Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). The phrase “when I was young” can often rightfully be uttered by those in their late 20’s.

Given this situation, teens need to turn to others in the transition from the home of their parents to being emancipated (Ling & Helmersen, 2000). While parents can provide security and encouragement (along with a lot of chauffeuring and economic support) the family is often not an institution in which to share the exploration of new styles, and the avant-garde. Education is also a central element here, but it is not the only one. The school provides formal instruction and also certification that is important in the eyes of eventual employers. However, the school is not directly oriented towards giving the teen a forum wherein s/he can participate in decision making on a like basis with others of similar age. There is always an implicit power relation between students on the one hand and teachers and other authorities.

The peer group is a fundamental institution for teens. It is a context that allows the teen to participate on in decision making with other equally empowered individuals. The peer group allows the individual to participate in decisions about which film to see, which clothes to buy, which boys/girls are creepy or enticing, advice on how to deal with various authorities

– usually parents and teachers – and how far it is acceptable to “go” in the area of sexuality, alcohol, and drug use, etc. (Pedersen, Samuelsen, & Wichstrom, 2003).

One of the problems related to the peer group in contemporary society is that it is often geographically distributed both when thinking of where they live and where they participate in free-time activities. This means that mediated communication is essential when considering coordinating activities (Ito, 2005; Ling, 2004), exchanging information as to what is in/out, hot/not so hot etc (Fortunati, 2005a, , 2005b), and in terms of simple phatic confirmation of status (Ling & Yttri, 2002). In the recent past the family telephone was a solution to this communication issue. In addition, pagers saw a brief period of eminence (Ito & Okabe, 2005; Ling, 2000). They allowed for various types of coded interaction – 5 meant “we can meet at the store,” 4 meant “I will call you later,” 3 meant “I love you,” etc. The advantage was that they were mobile, inexpensive and personal. They were, however, limited in their ability to convey meaning and clumsy in use. This is where the mobile phone and, in particular texting come onto the scene. Various calling plans – pre-paid calling in much of Europe and Asia – and the subsidizing of handsets by the telephone companies has meant that teens were in many cases quick to make the transition to mobile telephony. Interestingly the situation in the US illustrates another dimension of emancipation. In this case, the low nation-wide flat-rate pricing structure for mobile telephony means that parents and children can be in daily contact regardless of distance. Thus, university students who have moved to the far reaches of the nation may be expected to call their parents on a daily basis. This may have the effect of stunting the emancipation process. Indeed this may point to the dialectic nature of mobile phone use by teens. On the one hand it serves as a greatly extended umbilical cord or in the phrase of Roger Silverstone a "transitional object" (Silverstone, Hirsch, & Morley, 1991) but on the other hand and it plays into the emancipation process of adolescents.

Teens and the adoption of mobile telephony

As noted in the introduction, teens have, in many cases, become the ideal type users of mobile telephony. They popularized the social use of texting. They have developed a linguistic and manual dexterity in the composition of messages that is not matched in other groups. They are in contact with peers at the drop of a hat, and sometimes at unseemly hours. The mobile telephone has given teens a way in which to participate in peer culture almost where ever and when ever they wish. Is the class at school boring? Are you tired of being at the family dinner? Are you on a long trip when the parents are bored to tears? No problem; you can see who is available via texting and share them your anguish at having to hear Uncle Ned tell the same old story again or tell them of your mortification when having to shop with Mom, or even worse, with Dad. None of this is a problem since the peer group is almost always accessible. This is described by Licoppe's idea of "connected presence" (Licoppe, 2004). Following Licoppe, the mobile phone allows for us to be always in touch. Thus, instead of saving up thoughts and insights until it is possible to sit down and have a good chat with a friend, we can send them to each other immediately since the threshold for interaction has been lowered.

In addition to facilitating peer interaction the device is also useful for teen lovers who can communicate behind the backs of their – perhaps rightfully – anxious parents. The camera function can be used to share photos of potential love interests within the peer group in order to elicit their evaluation (Scifo, 2005). After the initial contact between a nascent pair takes place texting can be used to ease the initial stages of the romance since it allows for more carefully staged and properly edited interaction (Ling, 2004). After the relationship is established the telephone allows teens a discrete communications channel (Dietmar, 2005; Döring, Hellwig, & Klimsa, 2005; Ellwood-Clayton, 2003, 2005; Ito & Okabe, 2006; Prøitz, 2005, , forthcoming). These interactions need not be censured as was the case with the house

telephone but can be candid discussions describing a variety of abandoned desires (2004). Use of the device also seems to co-vary with the level of sexual activity (Pedersen & Samuelsen, 2003). Finally at the end of the relationship texting is again useful if somewhat cowardly way to avoid direct real-time confrontations.

The mobile telephone has also found a role in different nefarious activities among teens. Picture messages have led to certain amount of photographic chicanery (Brandtzæg, 2005; Tikkanen & Junge, 2004), bullying (Campbell, 2005; Tikkanen & Junge, 2004) and so-called happy slapping (Brough & Sills, 2006). In addition analysis has shown that there is a link between serious forms of illegal activities – fighting, theft, use of narcotics – and mobile phone use (Ling, 2005a).

Bringing this back to the broader question of social cohesion, the research showing the tightening of the peer group seems to indicate that mobile communication promotes in-group communication. As is obvious from the proceeding material, the solidarity can be either in the form of socially wholesome activities, or less savory gang related activities.

Taking this point somewhat further, there are also some hints (Reid & Reid, 2004) that it does this at the expense of what Granovetter called weak-ties (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, we might be prompted to ask what is being lost and what is being gained by the increasing use of mobile communication within the peer group. Is it leading to a type of clique culture? Is it giving teens a strong primary reference group that will help them through the vicissitudes of adolescence? Is it leading to what Putnam called a balkanization of the peer group, that is the peer group existing in a type of walled garden where they are only concerned with their own interactions? Indeed, Portes takes this up as one of the central questions of the so called social capital tradition (1998). What is the optimal level of cohesion? If there is too little social cohesion in a society the individual may become subject to a type of Durkheimian anomie where the lack of ties results in either self destructive or socially destructive behavior.

On the other hand if the internal ties in the clique are too tight, and there are not enough loose ties outside the primary group, Portes suggests that a type of Mafia situation exists (Portes, 1998). In this scenario, the individual is only in contact with the group and there is no “weak-tie” interaction. This means that the individual may lose access to the resources that are only available via the intermittent ties to those outside the group. This includes things such as tips regarding jobs, a wider pool of individuals from which to choose a boy/girlfriend, informal information on important events, etc. Tying this into the discussion on mobile telephony, the connected presence that is cultivated by the telephone might have this as a social impact.

The impact of the mobile phone on communication

In conclusion we might ask what the impact of the mobile telephone has been on teen-communication. This is obviously a broad question. Rather than try to sketch an expansive answer here it is probably better to look at some of the specifics.

Linguistically it seems that the adoption of the mobile phone, and in particular texting, has led to some adjustments in the form of interaction. On the whole, texting does not stray far from other forms of written mediated interaction (Hård af Segerstad, 2005; Ling, 2005b). There are some forms of interaction that are perhaps unique to text messages. Some words have been shortened but not nearly as many as journalists have suggested. In addition, teens seem to have adopted some fanciful forms of punctuation – i.e. the use of the ellipsis as a general purpose replacement for periods, commas and even question marks – but on the whole, text messages are strikingly similar and inspired by other forms of written, and in particular electronically mediated interaction (Ling & Baron, forthcoming). This said, text messages result in a type of communication that is perhaps less buffered by the traditional small talk regarding the weather and reflections on recent events. The form of interaction encourages a more direct exchange.

As noted above, the mobile phone has lowered the threshold for communication for an age group that take peer group interaction very seriously. The device is a communications channel that allows teens to master geographical constraints, limits imposed by parents, time constraints associated with school and other free-time activities, etc. The mobile phone is a natural tool in the mastering of this problem. Indeed the lowering of this barrier has opened the ability to interact on a much more continuous basis.

The mobile phone is playing into the emancipation of teens. On the one hand it allows for continued contact with parents, even though this may be an embattled point in the intergenerational interaction. At the same time it is a portal to the peer group. Up to this point it seems to have enforced the cohesion of the peer group. The impacts of this will be interesting to follow as the first of mobile using teens move into other, more established periods of their lives.

As the technology develops we will likely see other functionality embedded in the device. Music players, enhanced texting possibilities, cameras, and location finding devices all seem to be converging into the simple mobile telephone. These may have their impact on teens and teen culture. Knowing where friends are in real time, being able to create and share music, and knowing the availability status of others are all functions that will likely be associated with the device. However, the real revolution of the mobile telephone is that we become individually addressable. Regardless of where we are and what we are doing, we can be reached individually. As developed here this means that we can micro-coordinate and we can share with each other on an hour-by-hour and even a minute-by-minute basis.

Researchers need to follow these issues as they are reflected in the development and maintenance of social cohesion and the process of teen emancipation.

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