

Barry Brown, Nicola Green and Richard Harper (Eds.) *Wireless world - Social and interactional aspects of the mobile age*, Springer, CSCW series, London, 2002

Looking at talk in a wireless world

The global use of mobile phones exceeds the use of stationary Internet and desktop computers (Townsend, this volume). And the users get so fond of these devices so they see them as part of their anatomy and thus find it hard to live without them.

The authors in this anthology discuss the many ways in which mobile phones have been successful over the last decade. The remarkable success of mobiles seems to have come as a big surprise to many computer scientists. A few years ago the constraints of the desktop computer and the graphical user interface led many, including researchers in CSCW, to dream about screens as large as office-walls and others to think of easier ways to enter information other than the Qwerty-keyboard. However, now the opposite seems to have happened. We are flooded with devices with miniscule screens, graphic users interfaces with ridiculous scroll menus and even worse sound quality than in traditional phone communication. Moreover the services provided by these devices are nothing less than plain and ordinary talk and ability to send very short text messages. It is as if people have been sent back to the computer stone age. There must be something wrong with the users who buy this stuff!

It has taken a while for the researchers to catch up, and the authors in this anthology are among the first to study the social aspects of mobile communication. Despite the apparent defects of these devices, the authors discuss, the power of the technology that makes it so ubiquitously applicable. The studies vary both in topic and methodology ranging from theoretical discussions in geography and city planning to ethnomethodologically inspired field observations. In the light of the freshness of the approach and the demand for this kind of research it is only appropriate to introduce such a broad spectra. The result is highly relevant for those interested in computer supported cooperative work.

The sociologist Geoff Cooper discusses whether mobile phone use brings with it specific changes in social interaction. In contrast to what is often suggested, he argues that it will not change our experience of movements in space and time, making where we are irrelevant for us. How can it be otherwise when people spend so much time talking about their whereabouts on the mobile phone? But the fact that we are almost always available, seen both as an opportunity and a demand, changes the conditions for social interaction. More importantly, the use of mobile phones blurs social distinctions between places and activities, such as between the office and office-work. In a similar way, he argues that public interaction in modern city life has been based on what is visibly available. Before modern urban life, interaction was basically pursued through conversation. Then, the anonymity and brevity of city encounters pushed talk into the private sphere. Presently, this distinction between private/public interactions is blurred by the use of mobiles, filling the city with the sound of halves of personal conversations, which are available for others to hear. Thus, the way we behave in relation to settings such as the home or the public square is drastically altered.

In quite a different analysis, the geographer Eric Laurier observes Sylvia, a mobile office worker, during her work travels. Her work involves assembling her office outside of traditional bureaucratic buildings, like meeting colleagues in cafés or talking on her mobile as she drives. This form of office work is an accomplishment by Sylvia and her colleagues, rather than just a mechanical routine affair. For example Sylvia needs to blend many activities

throughout her travel, which make it difficult to call this activity either work or leisure. Laurier watches her when she manages difficulties/problems in her everyday work, such as when she has a flat tyre and call for assistance. In this example by chance she discovers a beauty parlour at the side of the road where she gets a facelift making the most of the time. Laurier concludes that the traditional means of exerting centralised power through co-location is challenged by dislocated mobile practices, which successfully use many different ways, such as call screening of incoming calls from the office, to decentralise the social order of the organisation.

In two different articles written by on the one hand Alexandra Weilenmann and Catrine Larsson and on the other by Ged M Murtagh we are provided with detailed investigations on the visible and local interactions of public mobile use. Weilenmann and Larsson reveal interesting details about the ways in which phones are shared in the local situation of use among Scandinavian teenagers. During ethnographic fieldwork, they found that teenagers' ways of using mobiles differ from an understanding of such devices as personal and private objects. Teenagers share their phones in many ways. They share them when SMS-messages are read aloud or when the screen is displayed to others. They also take turns in a conversation by handing over the phone or they borrow the phone from another. The latter makes it difficult for an outsider to even decide to whom the device belongs. Murtagh discuss how people interact publicly to achieve a morally accountable use of the phone. This is achieved through interactions by visual cues like gaze and body movements. For example, people are observed to interact collaboratively to get a phone answered by looking at a ringing mobile and/or looking for their own phone. Similarly, they use visible cues when a caller exceeds the appropriate time for an individual call, or discuss an inappropriate topic, for a publicly available conversation.

These studies, and many other in the volume, provide useful findings for the CSCW community on how smoothly mobile technologies supports collaborative work. But more importantly they suggest the need for a broader scope than just on the capital W in CSCW. These authors clearly present how the computer, although in a tiny shape, has long since left factories and office buildings. Mobiles support a blending of collaborative work into many other activities, and they are used in many different collaborative activities than professional work. Many exciting design challenges are to be found in these new areas.

Although the volume provides preliminary insights into a number of topics surrounding the use of the mobile devices, there are issues that would have been worthy of more careful discussion. The wireless world is already global and ubiquitous and so are the social and interactional aspects of it. It is a bit peculiar that we get so little discussion about the ways in which people collaborate and orient towards each other through this new medium. In other words, what the talk on the phone itself adds to the interaction. It is as if the researchers have fallen into the modern trap, discussed by Cooper, overemphasizing visual mobile phone interaction in public and downplaying the role of the audible. This is something that must be considered in future work.

But some articles displays to much variability of quality when aiming at the topic of the book. The research they report is obscure for many reasons, and they seem to struggle with making clear what their research questions are. Some of the authors adopt a too theoretical stance. In this volume we find many references to the old scarecrow of technical determinism and at occasion lengthy accounts of social theoreticians like Foucault. These appear to restrain those authors from coming up with the interesting research question until the concluding sections of

their articles. On the whole the book has too much discussion such as those aiming to deconstruct advertisements that "misrepresent" reality, which of course is an easy job. The question remains why they spend a lot of time trying, in vain, to convince the reader that advertisements are really a worthy topic before deconstructing that same claim.

Summing up, the authors do really provide many interesting accounts of mobile phone interactions. It has been stated many times in the CSCW community, and this volume is yet another case for the argument that ethnographic fieldwork focussing on the practical and situated details of everyday life, provides new and interesting accounts of society.

Furthermore, many of the social scientists in this volume seem to work in settings, such as corporations and computer science institutes, where there is an interest for invention and design of new technology. Occasionally, this is understood as a hindrance to good science. But given the very high quality of the articles in this anthology, this context is perhaps somewhat paradoxically rather a resource in their work. If it then eventually leads to new services or applications is of course a concern for their employers. But from a social science perspective, we don't have these kind of worries.

Ph D Oskar Juhlin
Studio Director
the Mobility studio, Interactive Institute
Stockholm, Sweden
www.interactiveinstitute.se/mobility