

Mundane Mobile Maintenance, Entrapment, and Hyper–Coordination

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INTRODUCTION

The global adoption of mobile devices has outpaced that of previous technologies and the use of mobile devices will likely continue to increase into the future. Mobile phones are cheaper than earlier technologies like computers, while having the added benefit of being more portable and more accessible. As technology has and continues to progress toward greater digital connectivity and versatility, one of the most critical functions of mobile phones is social connection (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Although Europeans more quickly adopted short messaging services, or text messages, compared to Americans in the early 2000s due to pricing differences (Ling, 2004), the rise of mobile technology in America has been swift and transformative. Between 2006 and 2008 the number of text messages sent by Americans increased by 450% (Nielsenwire, 2008), and continued to increase through 2010 (Pew Internet, 2010). According to the most recent statistics, 90% of Americans have a cell phone and 58% have a smartphone (Pew Internet, 2014). The addition of each technological function, from voice calls to text messages, and from email services (like Blackberry) to Facebook and Twitter, creates new opportunities for social connectivity. New smart phone applications such as Snapchat and Tinder provide previously unimagined ways to connect socially with friends and strangers alike. The social purposes of mobile technologies are not soon to abate or retreat, but rather are likely to

become broader and more entrenched into users' daily lives as more applications and functions become available.

Some have argued that mobile technologies inextricably direct users toward social connectivity, often referred to as “perpetual contact” (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Indeed, a recent Pew Internet (2014) report states that “67% of cell owners find themselves checking their phone for messages, alerts, or calls – even when they don’t notice their phone ringing or vibrating,” and “44% of cell owners have slept with their phone next to their bed because they wanted to make sure they didn’t miss any calls, text messages, or other updates during the night.” Rather than focus on the use of mobile technologies for instrumental or informational purposes, the focus of this chapter is on the social and relational consequences of this perpetual contact.

The three key concepts will guide this chapter. Mundane mobile maintenance refers to the degree to which individuals are dependent on their mobile device for mundane relational maintenance (Hall & Baym, 2012). Mundane relational maintenance involves the process of *sharing* daily life events and information, such as asking and answering questions like “what are you doing?” and “how are you?” (Tong & Walther, 2011). Mobile technologies provide manifold opportunities for relational partners who may not be geographically close to get a sense of closeness through mundane exchanges through texting, calling, or using social media or other apps. Increasing mundane mobile mainte-

nance runs the risk of greater entrapment, which is the experience of feeling *guilt, anxiety, or stress to respond and to be available* via a mobile device (Baron, 2011). While being able to contact others is one of the most appreciated qualities of mobile phones, being continuously available for others' contact is also strongly disliked (Baron & Ling, 2007). Expectations of coordination and relational maintenance pressure relational partners to be available for perpetual contact, which can result in entrapment. Finally, hyper-coordination (Ling & Yttri, 2002) is the experience of enhanced, anxiety provoking *relational dependence* enabled through communication with a mobile device. When mobile technologies become further enmeshed into relationships, connectivity can become dependency. Together these concepts can be used to look at relational maintenance behaviors through mobile phones in an increasingly multimodal age.

OVERVIEW

This area of research is fairly new. Mobile phones (and now smart phones) were only heavily used for relational maintenance in the last decade and a half. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) issued a report in 2013 noting that worldwide there were 6.8 billion mobile phone subscriptions, one phone for roughly 96% of the global population, while in 2001 (just 12 years earlier) mobile phone plans only covered 15.5% of the population. As the mobile phone was adopted and increasingly used for social purposes, related research kept apace.

Dr. Rich Ling (Ling & Yttri, 2002; Ling, 2004) of the IT University of Copenhagen, Dr. Christian Licoppe (Licoppe & Huertin, 2001; Licoppe, 2004; Licoppe, 2008) of Telecom Paristech, and Dr. James E. Katz (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Katz, 2008) of Boston University (in Massachusetts) are among the earliest to examine the relational implications of the mobile phone, and each remains a leading scholar on the topic today.

The earliest published work related to relational maintenance, dependence, and mobile phones is Licoppe and Huertin's (2001) study of French mobile phone users. Licoppe and Huertin explored questions of mobile phone use and availability in a series of qualitative interviews. Even in these early days of adoption, increasing reliance on new communication technologies was accompanied by a high number of participants experiencing anxiety with the idea of turning the phone off or leaving it behind. Also important in this early work was a discussion of reciprocal dependency of mobile maintenance. As mobile phone use increased, relational partners began to jointly expect one another to use mobile phones for maintaining the relationship (Licoppe & Huertin, 2001).

Ling and Yttri's (2002) research developed these concepts, arguing that the use of mobile phones allows for micro coordination and hyper-coordination. They argue that mobile phones make it so that plans are no longer immutable; they afford the possibility of immediately contacting the other person and to alter terms as needed, which is called micro coordination. This helps relational partners by allowing one party to let the other know if they need to push things back, when they left, and whether they need to change plans (Ling & Yttri, 2002; Ling, 2004). Micro coordination can be seen as a form of mundane mobile maintenance because the coordination of activities is a simple everyday task shared between relational partners (Ling & Yttri, 2002). This compliments research from Licoppe (2004) who suggested that young mobile phone users are particularly likely to engage in short targeted calls or texting (i.e., micro coordination) through phones rather than long drawn out conversations. This research in particular points to how text messaging is used as a way to send a short "thought at that moment" rather than developing an in-depth discussion of an issue (Licoppe, 2004, p. 150). This type of mundane mobile maintenance builds up expectations of connectivity and communication, which is associated with greater closeness at the cost of independence.

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