

Mobile Communication Tools as Morality–Building Devices

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns a quite ordinary although often underestimated consequence of the use of mobile communication devices in public places: by virtue of their affordances and projected uses, these artifacts trigger a moral reasoning on what is right, expected and appropriate (or not) for the individual in public places, i.e. they are morality-building devices.

Fifty years ago, Erving Goffman wrote an unparalleled essay on behavior in public places. As he put it, “rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theaters, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organization” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 3-4). In delineating this area of sociological investigation, he precisely noticed the significance of taking into account the usual behavior, the “ordinary human traffic and the patterning of ordinary social contacts” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 3-4). Since then, a whole generation of studies have analyzed face-to-face communication and social interaction, focusing on the multiple ways in which participants constructed locally appropriated social identities, reciprocally managed their self images, and made some interactional work for “doing ‘being ordinary’” (Sacks, 1984, p.414). Yet Goffman’s programmatic simplification of the field of inquiry may at first appear to be no longer applicable: in many natural occurring social encounters, information exchanged on a *naked* basis

(Goffman, 1963, p. 14) is becoming more and more intertwined with information acquired and locally exchanged on a technologically-mediated basis. What was at that time the exception appears today to be more and more the norm: the senses are equipped with contemporary avatars of Goffman’s *boosting devices* (Goffman, 1963, p. 15) in ways that make Goffman’s distinction between embodied and disembodied messages collapse. In such an altered scenario, is it still relevant to assume that the “linkage of naked sense on one side and embodied transmission on the other provides one of the crucial communication conditions of face-to-face interaction” (Goffman, 1963, p. 15).

Many scholars have already made a conceptual linkage between the use of mobile devices and Goffman’s theory of behavior in the public place. While some claim that mediated interaction has distinctive features that differentiates it from face-to-face communication (see Collins, 2004), others argue in favour of the relevance of Goffman’s theory for understanding the hybrid nature of contemporary technologically-mediated face-to-face communication. According to Ling (2008), mediated interactions have the power to enhance the ritual dimensions of co-present communication by drawing on pre-existing symbols. In the same respect, Gergen (2002) goes as far as to pronounce the mobile phone a technology of communal restoration, being perhaps the most important technological support of face-to-face communication.

Insofar as the use of how mobile devices became more and more common during face-to-face interaction, this condition can only be fully understood when examining what mobile devices both do and make us do in the social encounter. If we still want to understand “the most diffused forms of social organization” (Goffman, 1963, pp. 3-4) of a community (wherein mobile devices are used on regular everyday basis), we need to take into account these non-human participants and their role in establishing, challenging, renewing, or reaffirming the meaning of social encounters and the rules of conduct in public places. As studies on mobile communication clearly demonstrate (Katz, 2002, 2008; Ling, 2004, 2008; Ito, 2005; Caron & Caronia, 2005, 2007; Turkle, 2008; Haddon, 2009), the “patterning of ordinary social contacts” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4) is now largely dependent on these artifacts. Their presence and use within the social scene make a difference (in comparison to their absence) that is traceable in people’s conduct and in the ways in which they account for social interaction being mediated by mobile devices.

In this chapter, we will focus particularly on the ways in which these artifacts enhance the stage dimension of any social encounter (see Goffman, 1959) and therefore make relevant a social reasoning about the ethical dimension of everyday practices.

Whenever we use a mobile device in a public place, an audience is undeniably present, and participates—willingly or not—in the unfolding of the play. Obligatory captive by standards, they seem to be drawn into a performance which they did not necessarily decide to attend, and yet they constantly condition. Whatever one might believe, mobile communication is, from the outset, designed to be performed on the public stage. It is constantly being adjusted to the involuntary audience and keeps traces of this orientation to a third party that is always included. Whether it involves using earpieces of a digital device as acoustic screens (Gumpert & Drucker, 2007), or removing them to indicate availability for interaction, the

attitude of the actors reflects their awareness of the other. Even ignoring their presence, wanting to be positioned as a solitary individual, deliberately unconcerned by others around, is a behavior that requires an interactive effort. In short, the use of mobile devices is a communicative behavior, one which, when dissected through this Goffmanian theory (1967), amplifies the enactment of oneself on the public stage.

The use of mobile devices in a public place is therefore a social performance that leads participants to manage (or to be concerned by) the self-images made relevant by the mobile device that are projected in the social interaction (Schlenker, 1980), the social consequences of a mobile device-mediated social behavior, and the cultural norms that govern (or should govern) this behavior in public places.

Although some of the early studies appeared in the mid 1990s, it is only within the last decade that we have seen a substantial influx in academic exploration of mobile devices and their social consequences. Pioneering scholars such as James E. Katz (2002, 2008), Richard Ling (2004, 2010), and Gerard Goggin (2006, 2007) have all delved into the behavioral effects of mobile device use within the public sphere, paving the way for further research that, in many cases, investigates mobile phones in specific contexts (i.e. social shaping, Haddon, 2009; children’s daily lives, Drotner & Livingstone, 2008; youth’s daily life, Turkle, 2008; Caronia, 2005; Livingstone & Görzig, 2014 and *moving cultures*, Caron & Caronia, 2007), and from different perspectives (i.e. cross-cultural studies, Donner, 2008; Ito, 2005; education, Campbell, 2006; Traxler, 2010; language evolution, Baron, 2008; macro-economics, Castells, 2006; esthetics and gender studies, Fortunati, 2003; sociology of sciences and technologies, Licoppe, 2008; and social network analysis, Welleman, 2006).

Although some observations of an ethical nature are occasionally referred to, few researchers (see Ling, 1997, 2008; Caron & Caronia, 2004; Ling & McEwen, 2010) have thoroughly

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