

Rich Ling: An Intellectual Auto–Biography

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INTRODUCTION: DISCOVERING THE BLESSED BANALITY OF MOBILE COMMUNICATION

Since the mid 1990's I have been studying mobile communication. In many ways it is a banal mediation form. Particularly in its pre-smartphone semblance, it was (and still often is) “only” used for talking and texting. As with studies of email, this is simple functionality often puts it in shadow of other perhaps more flashy mediation technologies. The weight of research in this area shows that it is far more interesting to study how newer technologies (social networking, blogs, gaming, etc.) engage “first users”’ attention. That said, mobile telephony is the most widely diffused mediation technology on the planet (6.6 billion connections as of this writing).¹ In spite of its banality, it is something unique.

The mobile phone has, from its inception, changed how we carry out social interaction. To gauge this, we need to simply think about to the situation before mobile telephony to see the complexities of organizing our lives. The fact that the mobile phone system makes us individually addressable has dramatically changed the way that we are able to microcoordinate our social interaction. Indeed, this is perhaps the most revolutionary social consequence of the device and it has been a motivation for my work.

The idea of using the mobile phone to coordinate seems obvious. Let me relate a story from my own life that shows how it has changed things. One evening – before we had mobile phones – my wife and I were invited to eat dinner with a friend. We lived within walking distance of a small shopping

area. My wife (who is Norwegian) and I needed to separately attend to a couple of errands enroute to the dinner. It was easiest that I drove and she walked to the center. Then we planed to meet up to drive to our friend's house. As I rushed out the door said that we should meet at the Texaco station. In my haste, and given that she has a “different” way of pronouncing Texaco, what I heard was “taxi station.” The Texaco and taxi stations are not more than 100 meters apart, but since the one is not visible from the other and we had no way of calling one another, they might as well have been Venus and Mars. In short, the seeds of a planning calamity had been sewn.

After waiting too long, I eventually parked the car (illegally), ran into a store to get change and find a phone booth so that I could call home to find out why my wife was delayed. Of course she was at the gas station, equally frustrated, and also trying to call home from another phone booth to see if, for some reason, I had returned home. I next called to our friend to say we would be late. Somewhat later my wife also called the friend to give the same message. I eventually called the friend again. She was able to help coordinate a family reunion. After several iterations and almost an hour of running into stores to get change in order to use phone booths, we managed to meet up at home again and start from zero.

This scene, based on a mispronunciation (or an inattentive listener depending on one's perspective), is comedic. However, it also underscores the role of the mobile phone in our lives. Had both of us been equipped with mobile phones, the problem would have been solved with a call, a few rebuffs

and a five-minute delay. The mobile phone may be banal; but it is also blessed, it is a godsend.

THE TRAJECTORY OF MY MOBILE COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Early Descriptive Work

My interest in mobile communication, and indeed my ability to follow its progressive diffusion into society, coincided with my work at what was then called Televerkets Forskningsinstitutt (TF) but has since become Telenor Research.² In the mid 1990's TF was a hotbed of technology development. The staff included Finn Trosby who was central in the specification of the Short Message System or SMS. In addition, the team that developed the Opera Internet browser – Jon von Tetzchner, Geir Ivarsøy and Håkon Wlum Lie – worked there. Needless to say, it was an exciting and innovative environment.

As a part of my work, I came across a series of focus group transcripts carried out by the nascent mobile branch of Telenor. When reading through these transcripts I saw that mobile communication was on the point of moving away from its yuppie legacy. The mobile phone was by no means a mainstream, but it was clearly on an upward trajectory. Falling prices and user-friendly handsets meant that it was increasingly being used for personal interaction. People interviewed in the focus groups noted the usefulness of mobile phone for making and rearranging appointments (viz. my botched meet-up with my wife) and for use in emergencies. They talked about their desire for new, ever smaller, and ever more feature-packed devices. The transcripts were also full of the informants' scandalized comments regarding teens' use of mobile phones. In short, there was a buzz associated with mobile phones. They had clearly entered into people's thoughts. The device was on the way to becoming normalized.

This tipped me off to the eventual social consequences of mobile telephony. Following up on

the material in these transcripts with other studies, I started to see how the technology changed social interaction. I was fascinated to see it was used to solve life's small and large emergencies and how it was used as a status object. I started to see how texting engendered special forms of interaction, innovative spelling and new forms of repartee. I understood that teens had found in the mobile phone a sorely wanted private channel for interaction. I saw how the mobile phone disrupted traditional collocated social interaction and I also saw how the mobile phone gave us direct access to our closest social sphere. Each of these themes became important for my work.

At about the time that I read the focus group transcripts, I was so fortunate as to be included in the work of the European Union's Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) project number 248. In that context I discovered that there were other scholars who were also studying mobile communication. These included Roger Silverstone, Leslie Haddon, Leopoldina Fortunati, Enid Mante-Meijer and others. This work resulted in some of the first academic analysis on mobile communication (Haddon, 1997a). It also exposed me to the broader sense of how to go about studying mobile communication. Importantly it helped introduce me to the notion of domestication. COST 248, as well as attendance at a conference organized at Rutgers by James Katz, gave me the sense that I was not alone in studying these phenomena.

As people increasingly adopted the mobile phone in the 1990s, it was clear that we were watching a small social revolution. We were micro-coordinating. Teens were embracing the mobile phone (Baron & Ling, 2003; Hård af Segerstad, 2005; Ling, 2005) and at the same time disrupting adults' notions of what is proper. People were changing the way that they were dealing with emergencies just as they were complaining about the mobile phone's ability to disrupt copresent interaction. Being continually available gave us pause to ask if we were incrementally becoming cyborgs or, on the contrary, if retreat from tech-

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