

Children, Risks, and the Mobile Internet



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INTRODUCTION

With the adoption of more and more smartphones, the scope of mobile communication is clearly broadened, as young people engage in new practices and address new audiences (Bertel & Stald, 2013; Ling & Bertel, 2013). New opportunities for sociality, self-expression, learning and managing everyday life become accessible on the move. At the same time, new concerns arise regarding the potential risks of the mobile internet for children – namely, the question of whether the intensification in space and time of online practices, in particular through social media, that is afforded by smartphones may influence exposure to a range of existing online risks, while also posing specific new challenges to children's online safety, such as emerging risks associated with location-tracking services.

The increasing preoccupation with the risks of mobile communication and mobile devices is an example of issues and concerns migrating from one research field to another – namely, from internet studies in general, and from studies of children's internet safety more specifically, to the field of mobile phone studies. Drawing on a review of the research on mobile communication and children, this article examines how a new research agenda has emerged within the field.

OVERVIEW: RESEARCH ON YOUTH AND MOBILE COMMUNICATION

Early research on mobile communication focused on young people as pioneers in the domestication of mobile phones and the creation of mobile cultures (Caron & Caronia, 2007; Ling, 2004; Goggin, 2006, 2013; Green & Haddon, 2009). Not only did teenagers and children adopt mobile phones extensively; they also experimented with new communicative practices, such as texting and beeping, and created specific sub-cultures expressed in and through mobile media.

One key framework in research on children and mobile communication is the 'emancipation' approach (Ling, 2004). This located mobile phones within the process of social emancipation by which teenagers and children develop autonomy from their family through socialisation with peers. This field has been articulated in two lines of research, the first examining the meanings and use of mobile phones within the parent-child relationship and the second investigating how mobile communication fitted into relationships with peers.

As regards the first, the mobile phone has become an important, though ambivalent, material and symbolic resource in the child-parent relationship (Green, 2002; Green & Haddon, 2009; Ling, 2004). Indeed, parents and children seem to

attribute different meanings to mobile communication. For parents, the mobile phone serves as an 'electronic' or 'digital leash' (Caron & Caronia, 2007; Ling, 2004; Ling & Haddon, 2008) reflected in their efforts to regulate children's mobile phone use and extend parental monitoring outside the domestic context. Parents enact what they perceive as being good parenting by imposing rules and, at the same time, fostering children's autonomy and responsibility. In contrast, children can see the mobile phone essentially as a means of escaping the parental nest. As a consequence, they engage in a variety of tactics to negotiate and manage parental surveillance, for example by turning off the phone and then claiming they were in a signal dead zone. While studies of youth and mobile phones have highlighted how mobile telephony represents an important step in the transition from childhood through adolescence towards greater independence (Green, 2002; Ling & Yttri, 2002), scholars have also argued that this safety link may actually reduce children's autonomy, since they can more easily get in touch with their parents whenever they meet any difficult situation (e.g. when they get into trouble with schoolmates) (Green & Haddon, 2009; Ling, 2012).

As noted, emancipation can be facilitated through social access to peers. And so some early research showed how mobile communication yielded new forms of interaction and coordination among teenagers, called micro- and hyper-coordination (Ling & Yttri, 2002). While the first refers to the practice of continuously rearranging the place and time of face to face meetings 'on the fly', hyper-coordination includes all the more expressive and symbolic uses of mobile phones among children, which have been identified as traits of youth mobile cultures worldwide. By developing a sense of 'connected presence' (Licoppe, 2004) with their intimate ties, teenagers reinforce group belonging while at the same time expressing their identities through identification with, as well as distinction within, the peer network.

This emphasis on social cohesion did not mean that mobile communication research downplayed

potential negative consequences. On the contrary, one major side effect of this 'anywhere, anytime' accessibility to peers has been highlighted: the same sociability that promotes inclusion in some peer groups may also be conducive to social exclusion from others through the formation of 'walled communities' (Ling, 2004). Meanwhile, a second concern which characterised mobile communication studies from the beginning was the fear that the perpetual contact with parents may actually hinder children's development and cause them anxiety (Bond, 2010).

Other risks, such as cyberbullying and sexting, have only been the focus of research within the field of mobile studies more recently (among recent contributions see, for example, Bond, 2011; Campbell & Park, 2014; Vanden Abeele & De Cock, 2013; Vanden Abeele et al., 2013). One exception was the study of sexting conducted by the Pew (Lenhart, 2009), in which the exchange of sexually explicit messages and pictures focused on mobile communication and not on online communication.

Nonetheless, these issues have been on the public agenda for some time. Happy slapping - which consists of recording offline bullying episodes with a camera phone or a smartphone, and later uploading the videos on YouTube or other video sharing platforms online - was 'discovered' by the British press in 2005 and contributed to increasing public concern. From the UK, the media coverage of happy slapping spread across Europe, receiving great public attention especially in Southern European countries (Mascheroni et al., 2010). Sexting, too, was popularised in media discourses in the same years, and received greater visibility thanks to the first legal cases against teenagers charged with child pornography in Australia and the US. In media representations, sexting and bullying often go hand in hand.

Prof. Richard Ling (Ling, 2004) at the ITU and the Telenor Research Institute, Dr. Leslie Haddon at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Ling & Haddon, 2008), Dr. Nicola Green at the University of Surrey (Green

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