

Chapter 11

Liquid Communication in Mobile Devices: Affordances and Risks

Ana Serrano Tellería
Beira Interior University, Portugal

ABSTRACT

Mobile communication and devices have raised a series of challenges concerning the delimitation of public and private, intimate and personal spheres. Specifically, and because of its close connection to the nervous system and emotions, these devices allow a wide variety of affordances while, and in accordance to the broad scope of previous dimensions, a series of worrying risks – because of the same relationship and interdependence between users' rational and sensorial sides. Thus, an international state of the art review will be discussed and the results and conclusions of the 'Public and Private in Mobile Communications' European FEDER will be offered. A range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies were applied: surveys about general use and habits, personal data and images; focus groups; interviews in person and by telephone; content analysis with a special focus on social media and an observation ethnography and digital ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Within the scope of the European FEDER project 'Public and Private in Mobile Communications' developed at LabCom.IFP at Beira Interior University (April 2013-15, Portugal), a range of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies have been applied. They were designed to, on the one hand, discover user attitudes, behaviors and performances and, on the other, delimit users' awareness and knowledge about this ecosystem. Specific research questions were focused on the ever-changing delimitations of the public and private spheres.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to reflect on the international state of the art review as well as on the results obtained from the project. Core issues faced concerning the appropriateness of the methodology were the hypothesis posited on whether linear perspectives would be suitable to the perceived

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non-linear *modus operandi* in the virtual media ecology. Apart from this reflection on the process itself, the intention is to offer a step forward in Portuguese research due to the fact that few initiatives have been carried out in this country on this issue.

This chapter will begin with the different approaches and concepts that framed and continue to attempt to explain the dichotomies between the public and private spheres in virtual communication. Bearing in mind that an international perspective agreement may be established, identifying some common user patterns, those shared conclusions will be addressed accordingly. Moreover, the specific features concerning Portuguese population and its specific technological appropriation will also be described. At the end of the chapter, the conclusions obtained will be given and compared with the overall tendencies identified.

BACKGROUND

Mobile devices and their media environment have produced a series of fluid parameters to configure online virtual communication, mainly altering space and time dimensions. In this sense, the research fields involved have indicated a variety of concepts that underline a main area of tension to deal with: the state of *perpetual contact* (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) and the *liquid environment* (Serrano Tellería & Oliveira, 2015).

From the creation of the profile and the digital identity to the emergence and maintenance of different kinds of networks off/online consciously and unconsciously, academics have delved into aspects and/or dimensions of *identity*, *big data*, *social media*, *digital literacy* and *interface design* that reflect core problematics about how we deal with and understand this ecosystem.

These types of technologies were previously described as “extensions of the nervous system” by Vilém Flusser (1988) when he defined them as a revolution. Paraphrasing him (1990), the human being is seen here as a media user not just as someone who ‘works’ with information (*Homo Faber*), but one who ‘plays’ with information (*Homo Ludens*).

Media is everywhere and we live immersed “in” it (Deuze, 2012). Thus, it can be seen how interface design works to dilute the boundaries between human and machines (HCI), incorporating these mobile devices into our daily life by fulfilling our motivations and, at the same time, generating interactions to produce them (Serrano Tellería, 2015c).

Wonder, Love, Hate, Desire, Joy, and Sadness: The six primary passions of the soul described by Descartes (1649) are increasingly incorporated into mobile interface design and the construction of messages, altering the way our brain, and specifically our memory, deals with general content and personal data (Serrano Tellería, 2015c).

The connection between emotions and health has already been proved, with our brain as the technology that links them (MIT). Also, the relationship between memories and place has also been recently demonstrated – the process of episodic memory formation (Meyer, 2014). Furthermore, we have wearable technologies and *media life*, offering constant motivations for our desires and feelings. Therefore, as much as they may fulfill them, we can incorporate them too into our routine. Thus, emotion and motivation seem to be key elements and technologies must work like our brain to establish the proper connection between users and interfaces (Serrano Tellería, 2015c).

At the start (Fidalgo, Serrano, Carvalheiro *et al.*, 2013) of this research within the European FEDER project ‘Public and Private in Mobile Communications’ (LabCom.IFP, Beira Interior University, April 2013-2015), a core definition was identified: “It was I-alone that was reachable wherever I was: at a

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