Cellular Telephones and Social Interactions: Evidence of Interpersonal Surveillance

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ABSTRACT

Changes in technology often affect patterns of social interaction. In the current study, the authors examined how cellular telephones have made it possible for members of romantically involved couples to keep track of each other. The authors surveyed 69 undergraduates on their use of cellular telephones as well as their relationships and their level of sexual jealousy. Results find that nearly a quarter of romantically involved cellular telephone users report tracking their significant other, and evidence shows that tracking behavior correlates with jealousy. Furthermore, participants frequently reported using countermeasures such as turning off their cellular telephones in order to avoid being tracked by others. In conclusion, newer communication technologies afford users to act upon protectiveness and jealousy more readily than before these technologies were available to the general public.

Keywords: Cellular Telephones, Protectiveness, Romantic Relationships, Sexual Jealousy, Tracking

INTRODUCTION

Although there are many ways to define technology, one frequent theme is that technology refers to the tools and methods by which we increase our natural capabilities (e.g., Mumford, 1963). Because technologies develop constantly, human action frequently, and arguably increasingly, leads to unanticipated effects (see Crabb & Stern, 2010). At the most dramatic and potentially horrifying, these changes include environmental disaster and the use of advanced weaponry. Technological evolution, however, does lead to countless subtler changes that we experience in our day to day lives. Many of these changes are societal, psychological or behavioral. From an ethical point of view, these many changes present people with situations and choices with which they previously did not have any experience and for which there may not yet be societal norms (Moor, 2005).

The recognition that technological innovations can have both positive and negative consequences is central to the wide ranging, interdisciplinary, and expanding field of technoethics. The pervasiveness of technology in human life makes it imperative that technoethical scholars hail from a vast range of fields (de Vries, 2009) as they collectively approach the
ethical implications of technology, including areas as far reaching as environmental impact, political implications, and societal transformation (Luppicini, 2009).

Technology in its end use directly impacts the thoughts and behaviors of individuals. Hence, psychology is a field that is well positioned to examine the impacts of technology on human functioning. Although the field of psychology has been neither organized nor systematic in its approach to technology (Kipnis, 1991), psychological research has a rich history in informing us of technology’s negative consequences (Stern & Handel, 2001). As far back as the 1940s, psychologists warned readers of the potential misuse of radio for wartime propaganda (Allport, 1947). In the early 1960s, psychologists studied the links between children’s television viewing and subsequent aggression (Eron, 1963). In the current age, psychologists have investigated the potentially numerous concerns regarding the Internet (e.g., Gackenbach, 1998; Kielser, 1997) including the potentially habit forming nature of the Internet (Stern, 1999; Young, 1998).

Privacy, and the right to privacy are frequently cited (Luppicini, 2009) aspects of human social life that have been altered by technological change. In this paper, we examine some privacy related effects that have accompanied the mass introduction of cellular telephones. Because this technology impacts individuals as well as interactions between individuals, this research can be considered social psychological.

Much of the psychological research on the effects of cellular telephones focuses on the effects of using cell phones while driving (Redelmeier & Tibshirani, 1997; Strayer & Johnston, 2001). This is quite understandable considering the well-established danger to self and others caused by driving while speaking on the telephone. There are, however, other psychological phenomena associated with the mass introduction of cellular telephones during the last two decades that deserve attention.

Technological innovation can change or eliminate social norms. Crabb (1996), for instance, found that users of easily affordable camcorders were quick to invade the privacy of others, demonstrating a degradation of the civil inattentiveness norm (i.e., it is impolite to stare). Technological change can also lead to shifts in patterns of influence (Kipnis, 1991). The introduction of the Internet, for instance, has given medical patients easier access to information about pharmaceuticals and their potential side effects, in turn empowering them vis a vis their physicians. Closer to the topic at hand, Ling and Yttri (2006) have described how cellular telephones alter power relationships between teenagers and their parents.

In his examination of technological design, Norman (1988) endorsed the useful notion of understanding the elements of our environment in terms of “affordances” or in other words “properties that determine...how a thing could possibly be used” (p. 8). Cellular telephones make it possible, for instance, to keep in touch with others who would not have access to a stable telephone. In turn, since the telephones are small and durable, they are also very portable. Finally, they are relatively cheap to purchase and use, so young people can typically afford to have one, and parents can afford to generously buy them for their children.

These qualities afford the users the ability to carry cellular telephones on their person through much of the day. They also afford the users to be accessed remotely, as well as constantly. In fact, it may be normative to keep the phones turned on, yet acceptable, as with residential telephones, to break this norm and to screen calls (Crabb, 1999).

At another level, we can also examine cellular telephones in terms of gratifications, or in other words, the instrumental needs that cellular telephones satisfy. While clearly satisfying our need to stay in touch with others, Leung and Wei (2000) also found that mobile phones satisfied people’s needs to stay in fashion, to maintain affectionate relationships, to relax, to do business, and to feel safe and secure.
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