Chapter XII

Mobile Networked Text Communication:
The Case of SMS and Its Influence on Social Interaction

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Abstract

This chapter introduces a qualitative study of the use of mobile text messaging (SMS) and reflects on how SMS influences social interaction. It describes how this new communication technology is used to maintain social relations and how it generally assists users in their everyday activities. Three issues are highlighted: how users use SMS to overcome shyness, how they use it for micro-grooming, and how they are able to control messages to their advantage. It is argued that SMS facilitates users in their everyday life through the ways it supports awareness and accountability. These characteristics make the communication channel a “social translucent” technology, contributing to its popularity. It is suggested that simple information and communication technologies such as SMS can provide powerful tools in new designs of information and communication technologies.
Introduction

Telephony is a communication technology that has altered our social practices in many ways, a change that has taken place over many decades (Fischer, 1992). The adoption of mobile telephony relied in many ways upon the century long diffusion of fixed line telephony. Still, researchers have been intrigued by the changing behaviour within many user groups that the mobile phone has brought about. Recent research in particular has looked at behavioural changes as people deal with being only “a phone call away” from each other (Brown, 2002; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). One of the most unlikely successes has been text messaging or SMS1 (short message service), which, even with a limit of 160 characters, has become a very common medium of electronic communication in many parts of the world, particularly Europe and many parts of Asia. Text messaging has received considerable attention, with some researchers going so far as to argue that SMS—rather than voice calls—has been the major force in the adoption of mobile phones (Jenson, 2005). The mobile phone is not just acquired for keeping in touch with loved ones during the odd day away from home, but also for the practicalities it solves on an everyday basis, from reminders to buy milk, to arranging a birthday party for a friend. Early research on SMS use suggested that its popularity, especially among teenagers, was due to the controlled cost that SMS provides (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001). However, later research tends to differ from this, emphasizing the efficiency of the asynchronous communication model (Jenson, 2005).

Moving beyond questions of why SMS has become popular, this chapter focuses on how text messages fit into users’ everyday lives and existing social practices. The chapter explores in detail how SMS is used among a group of young adults to manage the mundane activities of their lives by focusing on how text messages fit into the lives of users as well as how it both supports existing social practices and creates new ones. Instead of asking why users use “tedious” texting rather than “swift” phone calls (for example, Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Ito & Okabe, 2005), we approach the medium with the view that mobile phones are now being bought and used as much for text messaging as for voice calls, especially in the Nordic countries where our study took place. This study provides support of how this seemingly simple communication medium is powerful enough to add new structures to users’ lives without dominating their daily life. With the changing structures in users’ lives, issues of design arise. Underestimating the simplicity of design within communication technologies is a threat to the potential creativity with which the user can shape the technology. Implications are therefore emphasized in relation to the design and adoption of information and communication technologies.
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