

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MOBILE PHONE ON YOUNG ADULT COMMUNICATION

Carol COOPER
Rochester College, USA

Abstract: The convergence of media technology can now be held in one's hand. It offers new ways to communicate, unrestricted by location, mostly related to free choice and autonomy. Its portability has made possible the co-presence of synchronous and asynchronous communication, and has contributed to the popular notion that young adults are proficient multi-taskers. The ubiquitous use of the mobile phone by young adults serves as a vehicle for self-expression and collective identity, often through the use of text messaging and social media. This paper will explore some of the kinds of communication that are afforded via the mobile phone, and will then question some of the potential strengths and weaknesses in communicating this way.

Keywords: mobile phones, young adults, communication, multi-taskers

1. Introduction

To understand the impact of technology on communication, one need look no further than the mobile phone. Consider the following testimonies written in 2009 from two young adults about their smartphones:

"... I am almost ALWAYS on the Internet now. I love using the applications and the map option on the phone. I have used the map option MULTIPLE times since I bought the phone. I do look up YouTube videos like crazy though...I cannot see myself going back to any other mobile phone now. It's addicting but amazing at the same time." Female, 23.

"Living life on the go in a big city means it's nice to have the World Wide Web at hand. I love to be able to Google anything I need to know, or to get maps, or directions, or check my very important Facebook. It is a great asset to my ability to remain manly (i.e. not asking for directions!) and is a great tool for staying sane on a slow day at work." Male, 26. (Cooper, 2016,175)

These comments illustrate how the mobile phone has been domesticated into daily life. The word *domesticated* refers to a tradition of research that looks at how people give meaning or significance to technology in their everyday lives; how new technologies are "tamed" and become normalized. The domestication of technology framework is a four-phase conceptual framework – focusing on the appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion of information and communication technologies as they become a ubiquitous part of the household, originally developed by Roger Silverstone, David Morley, Leslie Haddon, Eric Hirsch and others in the 1990s (Haddon 2004; Berker *et al.* 2006). It evolved from work on the social shaping of technology (MacKay and Gillespie 1992; Williams and Edge 1996) and sought to provide a new way to describe and analyze how the relationships between people and technologies are constructed, maintained, and modified in everyday life. In broad terms, it allows us to avoid the

limitations of technological determinism on the one extreme but also of what might be called 'social determinism' on the other.

The domestication framework originally provided a way to analyze fixed objects in the home, e.g. a television or a desktop computer. The domestication of the mobile phone is somewhat different because it is a portable device representing many digital technologies. In addition, the realm for negotiating its uses inevitably extends beyond the physical space; and as such, the word *domestication* may not fit completely with the portability of the mobile phone. Nonetheless, the domestication framework provides a way to examine how young adults learn to make decisions about the ways they will use mobile phones, and how they fit into relationships and established routines. Domestication is underpinned by the "moral economy of the household" (Silverstone *et al.* 1992; Silverstone and Haddon 1996). This term was originally developed by the historian E. P. Thompson (1971), who studied the relationships between private economic and social relationships in the household and those of the public sphere. For Silverstone *et al.*, the moral economy of the household relates to the ways in which, on a macro level, its members engage with commodities that have initially been produced in and become meaningful in the public sphere, but who then contextualize and make meaningful the commodities on a micro level in relation to the demographics, values, structure, and activities within the household. In the process, its members define and evaluate their shared experiences with one another. On one hand, then, the individual and/or collective use of mobile phones is determined by the values that are shaping ideas about the domestic sphere of each household. On the other hand, the domestication of the mobile phone affects the norms and values that are currently helping to construct meaning for the household. The consequences of the domestication of the mobile phone cannot be entirely foreseen, and so household members may come to renegotiate and re-evaluate the structure and meaning of the household itself.

In the U.S., research has shown that young adults are interested in constant communication, and the ways they choose to communicate reflect how the domestication of the mobile phone. The Pew Research Center, a widely-used source for statistics about digital technologies the U.S., has reported that ownership of both mobile phones and smartphones has surpassed ownership of computers or tablets among American young adults 18-29 years-old (Anderson, 2015). At 42 percent, messaging apps are more popular among young adults 18-29 years-old, compared to just 13 percent among those 30-49 years-old. When it comes to social media apps, 59 percent of 18-29-year-olds use Instagram, and 88 percent use Facebook (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016). According to Pew Research Center researchers, Horrigan and Duggan (2015), the Internet is increasingly accessed solely by a "smartphone-only population" of young adults, minorities and lower-income Americans.

Consider some of the communication possibilities the mobile phone affords. First, the portability of the mobile phone makes communication possible anywhere at any time. Second, the ubiquitous use of the mobile phone by young adults is a vehicle for self-expression and collective identity, often through the use of text messaging and social media. (Please note that throughout this paper, the word 'texting' will be used as a colloquialism for 'text messaging.')

Third, young adults are now so used to multi-tasking, the co-presence of synchronous and asynchronous communication while simultaneously performing other activities has become routine. (Whether or not this means young adults are skillful multi-taskers is another matter). How is one to contextualize these kinds of communication into traditional notions traditional forms of

communication, i.e. intrapersonal, interpersonal, small-group and public communication?

One way forward is to understand the mobile phones as media rather than merely as a new technology, thus allowing one to consider it as a vehicle for several kinds of communication (Buckingham 2007, viii). One should also consider that the mobile phone was developed within a social and cultural context and is being used within a social and cultural context. Much of the available literature discussing the innovation of the mobile phone attempts to trace its roots to a moment in technological history. This is problematic because 1) media are not divorced from the society in which they are developed, and 2) technology is always evolving as the industry caters to consumers and current market forces.

This paper will take a rather pragmatic approach and summarize two of the general topics often discussed within traditional communication studies, in context with the ways young adults use the mobile phone: 1) how it affects relationships, and 2) how texting affects self-disclosure and conversation skills. There will inevitably be some overlap because communication is a non-linear transaction, (e.g. the use of texting transcends both categories) The paper will include two popular concerns regarding how the use of the mobile phone may be affecting communication skills negatively, and conclude with some reflective questions to think about past communication with present as we move further into the twenty-first century.

2. How the general use of the mobile phone affects relationships

Many young adults today have never known life without a mobile phone, and some have never known life without an Internet capable mobile phone, which is referred to as a smartphone in the US. Its significance as a status symbol has diminished, and in the process, the mobile phone has become increasingly important for creating and maintaining relationships among peers, and between romantic partners.

Research suggests that typically there is an emotional investment and connection with the mobile phone that makes it seem like an extension of the self (Skog 2002; Taylor and Harper 2002; Green 2003; Ling and Yttri 2002; Vincent 2005; Martensen 2006; Caron and Caronia 2007). No other recent technology has managed to become so personal to so many. Understanding the relationships young adults have with their mobile phones also reveals the kinds of mobile communication young adults use to form and maintain relationships.

First, mobile phone use among peers is a way of creating and/or maintaining social networks. It is possible to strengthen the bonds of the peer group without being physically present, while excluding others. Mobile phone use clearly contributes to the on-going construction of relationships, as Stald (2008) suggests, "... because the mobile is the key personal communication device for so many young people, it becomes important in establishing norms and rules and in testing one's own position in relation to the peer group" (143).

The rapid adoption and diffusion of the mobile phone among young people was largely unanticipated, and often while older adults were still navigating using it. The mobile phone seemed like the communication solution to an increasingly mobile lifestyle, however some of the daily social norms were disrupted as people figured out new etiquette, such as when talking or texting in public was acceptable. Young people were

a target for 'getting it wrong' and yet everyone was trying to figure it out. When young people's early mobile phone use was conducted under the gaze of parents and authorities, it helped in part to drive the preference for texting.

According to Ling (2008), the mobile phone is a supportive tool for maintaining existing relationships. It provides a virtual 'hanging out' space that face-to-face (FtF) meetings normally afford, transcending the distance preventing FtF relationships. This begs the question as to whether interpersonal communication is always FtF communication.

Second, texting can represent affection and emotional connection. Empirical research (Cooper 2016) revealed that texts were not extended conversations, but consisted mostly of information and endearments, the latter of which almost seemed like love notes. It was a natural (and virtual) extension of being with romantic partners, which had taken on symbolic and emotional meanings as a way of continuing their relationships when physically apart. Texting also provided a means to release daily frustrations about work, workmates, etc., so that all venting was done before getting home, and while it may not seem to strengthen the relationship asynchronously, being able to text throughout the day about such events made for a better FtF relationship.

Photos are also a form of communication between peers, romantic partners and strangers, and the personal camera has largely been replaced by the mobile phone as the picture quality continues to improve. There are at least two major types of personal and social uses of the camera: first, to record and store an individual or collective memory and second, to record and store a photo that a one identifies with and/or feels that others would too. One photo can serve both uses. Social media provide platforms to share them with others, known and unknown.

Scifo (2005, 365) refers to the cell phone camera as a "mobile archive" of photographic memories. Photos extend a young adult's experience, emotion and recollection of the captured moment. As photos are uploaded, the personal becomes social communication offering a group experience.

Taking and sharing photos has been termed "enacting ourselves" (Van House 2009, 1084). Van House (2009) argues that people are creating narratives about themselves and their interests. The act of such collocated sharing creates an impression of who young adults are, similar to Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self in social settings. Empirical research by Cooper (2016) found that all participants were used to being the subject of school photos, family photos and seasonal photos, and these visual images had become part of the implicit discourse about who they perceived themselves to be. As Van House suggests, the uses of the camera and video functions of the mobile phone are "...performative in the abstract, and literally" (2009, 1084). Such activity has raised questions and concerns about narcissism among some young adults.

Although texting has been mentioned in this section, its significance in changing the traditional communication landscape warrants more discussion below.

3. How texting affects self-disclosure and conversation skills

Self-disclosure and conversation skills have been affected by the ubiquitous use of texting. Initially no one thought texting would become popular since it was originally limited to a 160-character message written by repeatedly pressing a number button corresponding to its alphabet letter (Green and Haddon 2009). Teens were the first to

really adjust to the character limitations by inventing their own localized texting shorthand and slang. Texting allows people constant availability, offering a flexible way of coordinating everyday life. Texting also offers a way to form friendships and romantic relationships without the awkwardness of FtF meeting (and perhaps rejection). According to research from Finland, "Relationships often start with a text message, are maintained via SMS, and can be terminated by sending a message" (Kasesniemi and Rautiainen 2002, 183). Texting also means avoiding awkward social situations. In the U.S., unlimited texting is now usually part of a basic mobile phone service price. It remains one of the most popular functions of the cell phone.

Texting is also a visible activity illustrating the domestication of the mobile phone, specifically the aspects of objectification and incorporation within the framework. Objectification is primarily about the mobile phone as a physical object and what it symbolizes. This becomes apparent to others in the way it is displayed and talked about. Texting is an activity that can be part of the individual's private and social space due to its portability; and those spaces and the relationships between them are changed in some way as a result. The individual is different because of the choice to text (or not) and it affects the people who are nearby as they accommodate (or refuse to) the changes texting brings to daily organization.

Incorporation is the aspect that analyzes how the mobile phone is integrated into everyday life. It focuses on the ways in which individuals actually use their mobile phones and so it is also about possibilities and constraints of use. Incorporation is also about the ways in which young adults use a mobile phone differently from its advertised and suggested uses. Examining the ways in which young adults text give an understanding of how texting fits into their communication practices, and how it affects communication generally.

Ling (2010) has researched whether the volume of texting is a life phase common to all, or if it is characteristic of a cohort phenomenon. The first descriptor, *life phase*, involves studying mobile phone appropriation and incorporation to see if some meanings and uses for the mobile phone are a priority during a specific period in life before being relegated, or no longer used at all. The second descriptor is *cohort phenomena*, which is similar to a generational identity, and Ling illustrates this by citing examples from Robat (2006), who identified information and communication technologies (ICTs) according to generations, such as "pre ATARI" and "ATARI" (Ling 2010, 281). All age groups showed an increase in texting during teen years to mid-twenties, suggesting that texting is integral to various life stages. Ling argues that it is too early to definitely categorize texting as a characteristic of a life phase or as a cohort phenomenon, until future generations are studied. Both approaches may be needed in order to gain a comprehensive analysis and understanding the affect texting has on communication.

Research by Battestini *et al.* (2010) of almost 60,000 texts belonging to 70 American college students resulted in defining a conversation as involving "at least one incoming and one outgoing message" within a 20-minute response time. The participants, who were between 18-26 years old, considered texting an essential part of life, foremost to communicate with friends, and secondly, with classmates about college assignments, suggesting a cohort phenomenon as defined by Ling (2010). What is interesting is that the research also revealed a blending of mobile phone media to facilitate all communication, and conversations flowed between messaging, emails, texts, video chats, and sometimes voice calls. Texting was the link ensuring continuity between all forms of conversations and information as they shifted between media.

Although texting may seem almost universal, the kinds of texting can differ depending on variables such as gender, or social norms. A study by Baron and Campbell (2010) among university students in Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan and Korea sought to discover gendered differences in the way participants used their mobile phones. With regard to attitudes about texting, females were the most frequent texters and preferred to text because they felt it was quicker than talking, while males preferred to text because it was shorter and to the point. Baron and Campbell also discovered that participants manipulated communication depending upon how important it was to the initiator to hear a voice, whether the initiator wanted to engage in a longer conversation, or which mode would be the clearest form of communication (15, 22). Texting was used to control social interaction much in the way some studies have shown that people pretend to talk on their mobile phones in order to avoid social interaction (Katz 2006; Baron and Ling 2007; Smith 2011). Baron and Campbell's study also revealed cultural differences in texting protocols, such as Italians prioritizing family meal times by refraining from texting (2010, 34). Texting has evolved into a tool that allows one to control the volume and the kind of digital communication that takes place.

4. Concluding thoughts

So far, this paper has avoided the tendency to use a label such as *Millennials* because it can create artificial boundaries limiting a more holistic view of young adults. Labels can become a way of categorizing young adults mainly by their uses of new media technology, which can essentialize the significance of the mobile phone in their lives. The discussion has instead used elements of the domestication framework giving agency to young adults, who are not a homogenous group: the ways they use the mobile phone for communication varies, the frequency of use and the importance they ascribe to it are diverse as well, although broad areas of consensus seem to exist.

Alluding to any kind of sense of 'moral panic' often associated with young adult texting and use of social media has also been avoided. It is inevitable, however, that a couple of the more popular concerns about the plethora of texting and postings on social media be mentioned here in order to encourage continued conversations about what it means to communicate as a young adult today.

First, in relation the effects of the mobile phone on relationships: some research has indicated that those who spend the most time on their mobile phones are young adults with low self-esteem who are likely to demonstrate signs of anxiety or mobile phone addiction (Hong *et al.* 2012; Zulkefly and Baharudin 2009). Professor Larry Rosen (2015) points out "the time and effort we put into our virtual worlds limit the time to connect and especially to communicate on a deeper level in our real world" (as cited in the Wall Street Journal 2015). In addition, the expectation that one should be constantly available might also prove to be oppressive. According to Sherry Turkle, "...what is not being cultivated is the ability to be alone, to reflect on and contain one's emotions (Turkle 2008, 127). Turkle (2008) further argues that the tendency to have constant connectedness could create a co-dependency with someone sustained in a virtual world, and she calls this absent presence 'tethering' because the mobile phone physically ties the relationship together. One might question how a person develops a sense of self-worth and identity if the majority of relationships are conducted online and most of the personal sharing comes in the form of posting photos or comments on social media. FtF

communication is how one learns to understand facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. How will young adults learn to make eye contact, advocate for themselves or others, or deal with group dynamics or potential conflict in the workplace? Can Skype, Google Hangout, Facetime or Facebook Live bridge that gap?

Secondly, in relation to the effects of the mobile phone on self-disclosure and conversation skills, if young adults find that texting is easier than FtF conversation, it is no wonder there is so much political ranting and/or divulgence of personal information on social media. Texting allows young adults to say what they want when they want without a filter. There is no need for an immediate response from the recipient, unlike most FtF conversations. Texting and the use of social media also allows young adults constant connectivity, or in some cases, to switch off all together and become unavailable. Being connected does not mean there is a bond, or no existing relationship. Texting and the use of social media are tools that allows one to control the volume and the kind of communication that takes place. How will instant texting and posting on social media help cultivate thoughtful communication and stimulate real dialogue? Summarizing these concerns here highlights the fact that the influence of the mobile phone on communication is dynamic and ongoing.

In conclusion, here are some questions to consider when pondering what seems to be for some the differences between traditional forms of communication and the role of the mobile phone as a new form of communication:

- 1) What are the similarities between passing notes in school and texting?
- 2) What are the similarities between developing a relationship with someone by exchanging letters and texting?
- 3) What are the similarities between eating in front of the television and texting while one is at a restaurant?
- 4) What are the similarities between posting an uncivil comment on social media and slamming the door after an argument?

The influence of the mobile phone on young adult communication can be contextualized socially and also in relation to market forces driving the notion that everyone must be connected via the mobile phone at all times. Some of the challenges in communication today have replaced the communication challenges overcome in the past. The mobile phone does not necessarily embody a “problem” for communication, but rather the need for a better understanding of its influence on young adult communication today.

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