

Chapter 14

Social Resilience in Action: Subversive Uses of Mobile Technology in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Recent statistics about the mobile phone market in Brazil state that for every 100 inhabitants there are 130 mobile phones. Despite the euphoria that those numbers bring to business, the social uses of mobile technology in Brazil tells a lot about Brazilian society and culture itself, and show a more complex picture than merely a marketing phenomenon. The authors examine subversive cell phone use in Brazil against the background of the cell phone use worldwide and the social implications of that cell phone use. As soon as a technology is implemented in a culture, it is possible to observe uses that were not intended by the inventors or producers of that technology. People create different strategies to take advantage of the new resource. Using social interaction theories and an ethnographic approach in the natural setting of cell phone use in Brazil, the authors observed how people use the mobile phone technology for interpersonal communication. This chapter addresses three subversive uses of mobile technology, namely, i.) strategies of mobile phone coding; ii) SIM card management; and iii) criminal uses of mobile phones.

INTRODUCTION

The use of mobile phones in Brazil has skyrocketed in recent years with more mobile phones now than there are inhabitants; 130 mobile phones for every 100 inhabitants to be exact. Actually there are 130

mobile phone accounts per hundred inhabitants and not 130 actual devices. The reason for this is that many owners of the mobile phone hardware have a number of different SIM cards that they use with the same piece of hardware. They belong to many different mobile phone networks where

they have unlimited calling privileges. One might have a family plan and at the same time a plan at their place of work and possibly a third with an association they belong to. We know of some users that have as many as 8 or more different SIM cards.

Brazilians are a very resourceful people because of the way many of them have had to deal with poverty but as they have become more affluent they purchase mobile phones and turn their resourcefulness to beating the mobile phone system. We will discuss three examples of this resourcefulness – two that are benign and one that is sinister. One, the use of multiple SIM cards we have already alluded to. The other benign example is the use of codes to reduce mobile phone charges. The third example is the criminal use of cell phones.

In terms of the two benign examples we will show that in fact the creative use of mobile technology within the law and within the parameters of their contract with the mobile technology providers the people of Brazil have demonstrated a form of social resilience with respect to the rules imposed on them by the mobile phone providers. The strategies that they have deployed challenge the straight forward view of many that people from developing countries are mere victims of global capitalism. Their strategies and the way they face concrete situation of adversity have a lot to teach to business people that deal with technology about creativity, innovation and the concern for human values. They illustrate the fact that the digital age is also the age of ‘do it yourself,’ as Marshall McLuhan proclaimed long ago when he wrote, in 1957: “As technology advances, it reverses the characteristics of every situation again and again. The age of automation is going to be the age of ‘do it yourself.’ (quoted in McLuhan & Zingrone, 1997, p. 283)”

BACKGROUND: CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY OF THE CELL PHONE

The electric implosion now brings oral and tribal ear-culture to the literate West. McLuhan (1964, p. 50)

When McLuhan wrote this line he was probably thinking about television and other electric media of his day but in light of the emergence of cell phones it takes on added meaning. McLuhan would probably suggest that the reason that the cell phone is even more ubiquitous in some Latin American nations like Brazil and some Asian nations like Korea and Japan than it is in North America and Europe is because they are closer to their oral roots than the industrialized nations. Who knows this probe may even be correct. The content of the cell phone is the spoken and written word, hence the cell phone extends the ear, the voice, the spoken word, the written word and the mind, but it also extends the telephone system through radio transmission. There is a cascade from the mind to the spoken word to the transmitting cell phone to the receiving cell phone or telephone to the ear of the receiving party. We can gain an insight to the cultural and social effects of the cell phone by making use of McLuhan’s Laws of Media which state that every technology and every medium enhance some function, obsolesces the previous way of achieving that function, retrieves something from the past and flips into its opposite. The cell phone enhances the mobility of telephone communication and its accessibility, *obsolesces* the landline, *retrieves* nomadic existence, and *reverses* into a lack of privacy.

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