Chapter 5.32
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 messag-

ing or SMS[1] (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 & Eldrige, 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.

BACKGROUND AND RELATED RESEARCH

SMS was originally implemented into the GSM standard for mobile phone communication in the late 1980s as a replacement for pagers (Kopomaa, 2005). It was envisioned as an extra tool that business people would use on rare occasions to send messages, in a similar way as to how a pager sent a single phone number. The reasoning behind this was partly that messages were, and generally still are, limited to 160 characters and partly that the mobile phone manufactures and carriers could not imagine anyone wanting to type messages with a twelve-button keypad. However, after a slow start, SMS took off at incredible rates in the late 1990s in unison with teleoperators' subsidizing of handsets, making mobile telephones affordable for many people. In 1997, Finland, one of the earliest countries to adopt SMS, even offered it at no cost because of competition among teleoperators (Kopomaa, 2005). Figure 1 shows the increasing number of text messages sent in Denmark in the years before our study. Teenagers, in particular, represented a surprising group for the adoption of mobile telephony and, as will be elaborated upon later, much previous research has focused on this user group. A number of researchers have argued that SMS, rather than the possibility for mobile voice calls, was the main reason for teenagers' high adoption of mobile phones (Ling, 2004). Studies have looked into why teenagers have been so eager to use both mobile phones (Ling, 2004) and text messaging in Europe and Japan (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Ito & Okabe, 2005) as well as how they use this mobile communication technology.

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