

Mobile Technologies: from Telecommunications to Media

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Editors

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This volume, number 20 in the Routledge Research in Cultural and Media Studies series, originates from papers delivered at the International Conference on Mobile Media, held at the University of Sydney, Australia, in July 2007. The text is divided into five sections: 'Reprising Mobile Theory', 'Youth, Families and the Politics of Generations', 'Mobiles in the field of Media', 'Renewing Media Forms', and 'Mobile Imaginings'. As will be evident from the title of the volume and the section headings, the focus of the text is on media and mobility, with the central concern of whether mobile phones, devices and networks can be usefully conceptualised not just as telecommunications, but also as media.

The case for so doing is set out in the first chapter - The Question of Mobile Media. The chapter argues that, while the mobile phone followed in the trajectory of the fixed telephone, mobiles have amounted to something quite different and distinct. One strong early indication of this was in the patterns of uptake and exploitation of text messaging, a pre-existing technology incorporated into the mobile phone. It is noted that text messaging "took on a life of its own" (page 3), became embedded in youth culture, allowed the emergence of a distinctive texting vocabulary, and gained the attention of marketers and media moguls in the process. Significantly, texting became a preferred vehicle for news transmission in polities where freedom of expression is limited or where access tariffs for alternative platforms prevent wide popular uptake. Commercial interests also took note of the wide uptake. Broadcast media companies sought to harness the interactive capacity of texting via mobiles, to bring degrees of interaction into the passive viewing experience. Texting allowed viewers to participate in television programmes and influence outcomes across a variety of successful programme formats, including Big Brother.

More recently, increasingly sophisticated mobiles, coupled with increasing bandwidth, have allowed mobiles to emerge as significant access platforms for the Internet. Functionality previously accessible only on websites has been re-packaged as stand alone 'applications' formatted specifically for mobile usage. Music is avidly consumed and shared through mobiles, and the mobile has become a preferred platform for participation in online social networks such as Facebook. Mobiles are also associated with the provision and popularity of user-created content, principally through the live-motion recording capabilities of inbuilt cameras, and the ability to upload and share such content directly from the mobile without recourse to a desktop computer. It is apparent, then, that the authors' description of mobiles as "a strategically important site of innovation" (page 4) is an accurate one.

Having established this point, the remainder of this chapter introduces the rest of the text, setting out the case for this volume through the need for critical accounts, case studies and analysis both of the change in mobiles that is being brought by the shift into media, and conversely the changes in media that mobiles facilitate.

Alongside this opening chapter, the first part of the volume includes two substantive chapters. It is at this point that one cross cutting problem with the volume as a whole becomes apparent. This problem is one of the varying engagement on the part of the authors of individual chapters with the volume's stated focus on mobiles as media rather than as communications devices.

'Intimate Connections: the Impact of the Mobile Phone on Work/Life Boundaries' by Wajcman, Bittman and Brown returns to a recurring theme in socio-technical enquiry, and is described in the Introduction as one of two chapters providing a 'bridge' from 'current' mobile studies to a fresh conceptualization of mobiles as media. However, this bridge is only anchored on one side. The chapter presents an interesting discussion of a study that explores the mobile's capacity to promote 'connectedness'. The conceptualization of mobiles it promotes is firmly based in the narrow and familiar focus of the mobile as communications device, and we are not provided with any assessment of how the move into mobiles as media might further extend the work/life debate. Coming after the Introduction, this is a disappointingly reductionist interpretation with little engagement with the over-arching theme. 'Gender and the Mobile Phone' by Fortunati, is a clarion call to researchers to pay greater attention to the extent to which a gendered research paradigm has dominated enquiry, and marginalized women as users and co-creators of mobile technologies and media. However, and again, while it is stated that 'mobile media' is being used in the chapter as a lens to examine the construction of gender as it affects the domain, the thrust of the argument advanced relates to studies of the mobile as a communications tool rather than to the emergence of mobiles as media.

Part 2 of the volume - Youth, Families, and the Politics of Generations - is also concerned with long-established themes in mobile studies, but seeks more explicitly to reconsider these through the lens of mobiles as media. The chapters in this section seek to address the ways in which mobiles mediate social relationships and the family, particularly from the perspective of younger generations. The chapters have a stronger, if still uneven, engagement with the over-arching theme. 'Children's Broadening Use of Mobile Phones' by Haddon and Vincent brings mobiles as media, and the consumption and production of this media, to the foreground. While the chapter reports a small-scale study and lacks a strong theoretical basis, it sets out some interesting and pertinent insights around engagement with the mobile by children and the implications of emergent patterns of usage. 'Mobile Communication and Teen Emancipation' by Ling looks at the role played by the mobile in the experience of being a teenager, but here the media theme recedes back into the background, and the focus, somewhat disappointingly, returns to mobiles as communication tools.

The communications agenda is continued in 'Mobile Media and the Transformation of the Family' by Matsuda, which looks at the rise of keitai (mobile) culture in Japan, and positions the keitai in the powerful trajectory of the pre-existing use of the pager amongst Japanese children. The main thrust of this interesting discussion is on how

the mobile has been utilized in Japan as a tool for parental monitoring of their children's activities outside the family home. Japan also provides the context in the following chapter, 'Purikura as a Social Management Tool' by Okabe, Ito, Shimizu and Chipcase. This chapter takes as its focus pre-existing media that is now shared via mobile: the Japanese 'purikura' or photo sticker booth. The chapter is an interesting assessment of the extent to which the purikura experience contributes to the ways in which Japanese youth approach the picture-taking and picture-sharing capabilities of mobiles, highlighting the important role these practices play in negotiating social status of the users.

Following Parts 1 and 2, which are grounded in well-established approaches in mobile studies, Parts 3 and 4 are described in the Introduction as having a clearer engagement with defining and exploring the media implications of mobiles. Part 3 is titled 'Mobiles in the Field of Media'. However, even here the 'communications' perspective continues to be the starting point for the analysis. 'Mobile Media on Low-Cost Handsets: The Resilience of Text Messaging among Small Enterprises in India (and Beyond)' by Donner, addresses the experiences of mobile users in developing countries and brings attention to the continuing exploitation of SMS in these contexts. The chapter has only tangential engagement with issues around mobiles-as-media, discussing the extent to which SMS may be considered as part of the lower-end of media content. However, the chapter is a useful corrective to perspectives focusing on leading-edge capabilities.

'Innovations from the Edge: The Impact of Mobile Technologies on the Character of the Internet' by Sawhney offers a good contrast, presenting a useful attempt to assess the extent to which capabilities afforded by the mobile have fed into the on going development of the Internet. The chapter is prescient in establishing the capacity of the mobile to become an arena of innovation in its own terms. 'Media Contents in Mobiles: Comparing Video, Audio, and Text' by Oksman looks at the characteristics of and relationships between the different media formats made accessible on the mobile. The chapter adopts an appropriate focus on the user, their choices and preferences and establishes the importance of usability issues around the small-screen interface affecting the uptake of mobile TV services. 'New Economics for the New Media' by Cunningham and Potts is a substantial chapter that re-thinks the market structures and patterns of production and consumption around mobile media, approaching mobiles as a source of potential 'creative disruption' in the industry. The chapter presents an engaging argument about the nature of the 'creative industries' and highlights the role of complex social networks in creating an environment in which both the production and consumption of mobile media occurs. The final chapter of Part 3, 'Domesticating New Media: a Discussion on Locating Mobile Media' by Hjorth, assesses discourses around mobile media from the discourses of both 'domestic technologies' and 'new media'. The chapter argues the need to draw upon both traditions to produce a new framework for evaluating the multiple dimensions of mobile media.

Part 4 of the volume - *Renewing Media Forms* - contains four chapters looking at the place of mobile media in relation to existing and future media forms, to assess the extent to which mobile media will play a significant part in the on going development, emergence and consumption of media forms. 'Back to the Future: The Past and Present of Mobile TV' by Balbi and Prario looks at the emergence of mobile

television in Italy, contrasting its development with 'Araldo Telefonico', one of the telephone-based news and entertainments services established towards the beginning of the 20th century. The chapter reviews the similarities and differences between the two technologies, arguing that the communication model of neither could be considered purely point-to-point or broadcasting, and that both are best characterized as one-to-many. 'Net Dérive: Conceiving and Producing a Locative Media Artwork' by Tanaka and Gemeinboeck considers developments in music and art in the context of the specific contribution of location technologies to new forms of mobile media. Mobile news as a specific case of Internet news is explored in 'Mobile News in Chinese Newspaper Groups: A Case Study of Yunnan Daily Press Group' by Cheng and Bruns. This chapter assesses the gradual development of mobile-based news services in one province of China. It establishes that, while there has been a rapid and sustained growth in the provision of mobile information services, developments are hampered by the current regulatory and industry structures that exist within China. The chapter calls for market changes similar to those that have occurred in the West to allow for the convergence of service providers and content owners to occur.

The final chapter in Part 4 is 'Reinventing Newspapers in a Digital Era: The Mobile e-Paper' by van den Broeck, Lievens and Peirson, which brings a focus to bear on the 'reader' while reviewing mobile delivery platforms. The chapter highlights the potential of usable 'e-reader' platforms such as have now emerged in the market place, and stresses the scope for 'innovation through familiarity' over the temptation to provide novel e-services rolled into online papers, that do not fit the established preferences and habits of readers. The e-paper, therefore, is characterized as a source of evolution rather than revolution.

Part 5 – Mobile Imaginings – is the final part of the volume and contains four diverse chapters dedicated to 'future gazing'. The first of these - Face to Face: Avatars and Mobile Identities - by Kathy Cleland is an attempt to theorise the place of avatars on mobile platforms. The chapter addresses the avatar as a fresh opportunity for technologically mediated 'presentation of self', and speculates as to the role avatars may play on mobile phones. The discussion is also concerned with the extent to which avatars extend consumerism through the commodification of identity. In the next chapter - Re-imagining Urban Space: Mobility, Connectivity, and a Sense of Place - by Lee, how mobile media relates to concepts of space and place is assessed. Taking the case of a South Korean online social networking site that allows users to upload and geographically 'tag' images, the chapter looks at how this practice has changed people's sense of place in an urban environment. 'These Foolish Things: On Intimacy and Insignificance in Mobile Media' by Crawford assesses the emergence of microblogging via the twitter. Her thesis, convincingly argued, is that the sharing of everyday actions online – 'trivia' – fosters valuable connections between those who are physically remote. This, then, is a rebuff to those who criticize the Internet's unique ability to sustain forms of communication that they characterise as fragmented and superficial. The final chapter in Part 5, and the last chapter of the twenty contained in this volume, is 'Mobility, Memory, and Identity' by Green. The chapter explores how the Internet and mobile devices function as a space memory, through online and offline address books, the practices of sending (and keeping) texts and other media artefacts, all of which amount to contemporary 'social remembering practices'. What is distinct and about these contemporary practices is the extent to

which they are ‘exteriorized’. The chapter then looks at the specific capabilities which mobile applications can bring to memory-making practices.

This review of the content of the volume should assure readers of the diversity of topics and analytical approaches contained therein. It is this breadth of scope that is one of the main strengths of the volume. However, it is also striking that the editors describe the contributions contained in the volume as ‘papers’ rather than as ‘chapters’. This is appropriate. It could be argued that the contributions could have undergone further development following their delivery as conference papers, development which could have helped to produce a more cohesive volume. What the volume lacks is adherence to an over-arching analytical framework, extending beyond Chapter One, which would help to clearly position each of the chapters within the volume, and make it clear what their specific contribution to the cumulative outcome of the analysis is. A concluding chapter could have ‘bookended’ the volume and reflected upon what has been achieved.

Some of the most profound points are, in fact, made in the opening chapter, and it is disappointing that these are not explored in subsequent chapters to the extent that might be anticipated. Fundamentally, the authors’ assertion that mobile media does not equate to new media is an important one which requires attention and further exploration. The concept of mobile media provides a lens that, when used to view concepts such as user-created content and Web 2.0, can make these appear all defining. Fundamentally, however, mobile media is not ‘new’ – it is a recontextualisation and reformatting of older media, ideologies and practices (page 7). The extent to which these continue to shape outcomes is a theme that could have been pursued in each individual chapter. In relation to this but additionally, the editors argue that we should look behind the rhetoric of the ‘prosumer’ that is entangled with ‘web 2.0’, and recognise the persistence and even amplification of inequalities across social groups and across polities. The observation that many of the creative media applications that have caught the attention of researchers are from the developed world is particularly apposite.

The text has merit in terms of its scope, as will be apparent from my summary, and also in its ambition. It succeeds unambiguously in terms of the former, and only partially in terms of the latter. Rather than being the first text to thoroughly engage with mobiles as media, it serves instead to highlight the need for a new research agenda that will unambiguously take the new capabilities of mobiles, and the new behaviours of both users and providers, as the starting point for a grounded assessment of what exactly we mean by ‘mobile media’.

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