

Briefing: Patterns Of Mobile Phone Use

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THE RESEARCH

In a study carried out in Finland, Pasi Maenpaa examined the impact of mobile phones on interaction. Finland is not only home to the Nokia company, one of the major producers of mobile phones, it has the cheapest mobile phone calls in the world. Thirty users of mobile phones between the ages of 20-60 from different socio-economic groups, were interviewed. The way in which people used mobile phones was also observed in public spaces in Helsinki.

KEY FINDINGS

- Mobiles do not simply replace traditional telephones, they have produced new urban cultures.
- Interviewees did not feel that there had been any reduction in their face-to-face contacts. Many felt that they had increased. Mobiles seem to encourage face-to-face meetings especially among 20-30 year olds and calls are often about making the necessary arrangements. Mobiles are often used for making future conversation possible.
- Many younger interviewees had relationships with, for example old schoolfriends, which were solely maintained by mobile, which probably would otherwise not have been kept up, because calling on a mobile is easier than on an ordinary phone: on the way to somewhere, while doing something else, while waiting etc. Interviewees liked to make calls when they had nothing in particular to do.
- Nicholas Negreonte has argued that the digital society of email, faxes and answering machines will lead to an 'asynchronous world' which frees communicating parties from the need to interact at the same time. Maenpaa's research suggests that mobile culture is an 'synchronous world' in which life may be lived in spatially different places but in interaction with others, 'sharing one's life with others in real time.
- The disappearance of place or a specific location, is one of the big themes of post-modernist writing about the digital society. Use of the mobile phone points in the opposite direction: 'A student calls up friend for a cup of coffee after work, assuming her to be studying in the library nearby. A 30 year old man moving around the city remembers a friend living nearby.....besides pure sociability, the impulse to call is caused by the caller's location.'

The mobile allows real time control over the modern, dispersed and illocal networks of human relationships, giving a sense 'of where it's at'.

- The freedom to communicate wherever and whenever expands the sphere of the intimate, interpersonal society at the expense of public society. Conversations are held in the street once again but not with people who are sharing the same public space.
- Respondents felt there were negative aspects to mobile use, the fact that people could contact you at any time, for example.
- The research also looks at what the use of a mobile conveys to others. Using the mobile as a social performance is no longer a way to advance one's status, or to 'show off', it does not signify wealth, nor does its constant use indicate the user's higher social status.

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

Try to replicate Maenpaa's research by devising interview questions and an observation schedule to monitor mobile phone use. Try to collect data on:

- Who people contact
- Why they contact them
- How long they stay on their mobile
- How they think a mobile has changed the pattern of their behaviour
- What they think are the positive and negative effects of mobile phones
- How people behave when using mobile phones: where do they make calls from, where do they go to receive calls and what is the effect on people around them?
- What do mobiles or different types of mobile 'signify' for people in terms of image, identity or fashion statements

'Mobile Communication as a Way of Urban Life', by Pasi Maenpaa is to be found in 'Ordinary Consumption', edited by Jukka Gronow and Alan Warde, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, ISBN0 415 27037 5

