The Moral Order of Text

Richard Harper* and Phil Gosset**

*Social Shaping Research ** Futures Group, Vodafone R&D

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Introduction

"Text" is a new social phenomenon, much marvelled at and much commented upon. Its success is sometimes put down to its cheapness (in comparison to voice telephony) ( ), or because it allows new levels of micromanagement in an age of fraught and tight deadlines ( ) ; or even because it allows communities to create and sustain their own language networks ( ). It is often viewed as a threat because it will render teenagers ever more inarticulate ( ); it is a distraction from true engagement with people at a face to face level ( ), and some have even argued that along with other technologies, mobile phones will dissolve the 'civic' society (cf Sennet) (For a sample of papers on these topics see: Nyiri, 2003 especially chapters).

What is certain is that texting is at once 'merely' people communicating, undertaking the prosaic activity of chit-chat within the frame of a particular medium, yet at the same time, many other things too: Talking is after all not always merely chit chat: it is made up of very many different goals, functions, and content. Indeed one might argue that what one finds when one looks at texting is a microcosm of society at large, as Harvey Sack's taught us long ago about everyday conversations ( ).

Insofar as texting is thus a reflection of the society of which it is part, it is a wonderful topic for sociological inquiry, and it can be also an illustration of how that sociology ought to be done. For the sociological research on texting (certainly what has been published in the past four or five years), attests not only to the insights that sociological explorations can provide but also to the limits of sociology when it is done poorly. To capture and explore just how society is writ large in these little alphanumeric messages known as texts requires a sensitivity as well as a delicacy of understanding that is not always present. It is all too easy for the precise meaning of a text message to become obscured in the sociological efforts to prise open society; and on the other hand in focusing on the meaning, the sociological analysis results in society itself disappearing from view.

In this paper I want to address this imbalance by characterising what I will call the moral order of texting, an order which is at once local and specific, bound up with the meaning of the texts between the exchanging parties, and also a manifest operation of society at large, an instance of the regulated patterns of behaviour that is social action.

I want to approach this task by commenting on some of the literature on mobiles, in particular the literature purporting to analyse the use of text by teenagers. I will show that much of this research manages to misunderstand the evidence in such a fashion that the prosaic comes to be dramatic, what is the norm for family life becomes the exception, and the shift from teenager to adulthood becomes not a question of a faltering but

growing responsibility but a power struggle from which teenagers need liberation. In a phrase, this sociology makes melodrama out of ordinary lives.

I will suggest that teenage use of text should be seen and explored in light of how teenagers, like all people, create and sustain a mental world populated by friends, families and strangers, a world that is at once embodied in the things they collect around them and in the things that they do day in day out, and that this world, again like all social worlds, is a morally sanctioned construct, done well, done badly, managed chaotically and managed efficiently. What distinguishes it is two things: first, the commonplace fact that the 'teenagerdom' (for want of label) is a world in which individuals transit, from being socially irresponsible and carefree to being responsible and burdened; as it happens this is a shift as much in physical form as it is in social status. Second, I suggest that it is also a world that is, in terms of experience for the teenagers themselves, myopic, yet a world that from their point of view is rent with agony, doubt, and arrogance: for them, their lives are indeed a melodrama. But in so being this world, and their performance of it, is, I will contend, all too ordinary.

I will explore this world by suggesting that there are a number of metrics used in every day ways by teenagers themselves and those who have to deal with them, most especially parents, that are used to indicate how well they are fairing in the shift in social status. Two metrics in particular will be focused on. They are, first of all, the metric of financial cost though not only of texts themselves, but the costs implicated in all forms of every day conduct. I will show how the financial management of mobile telephony and texting

by teenagers stands as testament for the management of these other costs, and thus how say their spendthrift approach to say, clothes buying is a refection of and is to be uncovered by, assessing their competence or otherwise at managing mobile phone costs.

The second metric relates to what one might call conversational turn-taking systems, including text communications. I will show how systems of etiquette and propriety governing mobile communication is used to create fine but often consequential distinctions between teenagers of different ages, gender and social connection, and this in turn is a reflection of the delicate yet complex systems of turn-taking propriety that govern the behaviours of all competent social adults, whatever their age. I will note however, that it is individuals of the late teen years who seem most rigid and elaborate in the way they impose these systems, excluding some from communicating with them and admitting others strictly in accordance to certain rules of access that older and younger age groups worry less about.

Japanese teenagers and prison

There are many papers I could choose as illustrative of my concerns: Ito's 'Mobile Phones, Japanese Youth and the re-placement of social contact' ( ) will do the job. This paper is I think rather typical of the issues I want to highlight, and given that Ito's work is quite well regarded, it is probably familiar to many readers. Ito holds that there is a relationship between particular spaces and particular social groups whereby some groups have power in certain social spaces. Some of these groups attain this power at the expense of others. This leads to the view that social relations can be thought of as

constructed around various 'power geometries'. These are bound to particular places hence, power-space geometries. The task of the sociologist, Ito assures us, is to critique these geometries in such a fashion as to make the dispossessed, who ever they might be, gain more control of the space that they wish to inhabit.

The roots of this argument, if it can be traced anywhere, goes on the one hand through through Meyrowitz's curious interpretation of Goffman's dramaturgical ideas ( ), and, on the other hand, Foucault's vision of society as panopticon ( ). More particularly, Foucault claimed that the entirety of modern society was organised around the principle of surveillance by the state (and thus all space was designed to allow looking) and Meyrowizt, meanwhile, claimed that particular spaces were private and thus could not, before the advent of certain technologies, be looked at by any but those who had special permission and rights to do so (though the state may have especial privileges). These technologies, he claimed, were most importantly broadcast television, which was able to provide access to all 'back stage' places. In the nineteen nineties, Massey sought to bring these views together by creating the idea of 'power-space geometries' where certain groups have control over certain spaces, including the technologies that operate within (1993:).

With this analytical perspective in mind, Ito explains how fragile teenage social relations are. This is in part a consequence of how they are subject to severe spatial constraints or power geometries. She argues that teenagers are deprived of equal rights to the spaces of the home, where their parents have monopoly power which they exercise at will.

Teenagers are forced to behave in ways that parents insist on at the dinner table, at breakfast and in the bathroom; teenagers are forced to undertake their activities in ways that enables parents to exercise visual and auditory monitoring; and teenagers are forced to create an imaginative world of their own within the minimal space they are allowed: namely in the bedrooms. Here they exercise what limited power they have by ornamenting the walls with pictures that their parents object to, here it is also that they withdraw themselves when they wish to resist the power of others. Thus, according to Ito, the bedrooms walls are at once those of a prison, yet a meagre resource for the teenagers to seek resistance; the social system of power in society, are, we are told, writ large in the bricks and mortar of family life.

Mobiles have become so popular amongst teenagers, Ito argues, because they provide a technological tool to dissolve those social and physical walls, enabling the teenagers to reach out from their prison to touch those in other prisons elsewhere—those others, of course being teenagers subject to their own power geometries in their own homes. So the explanation for the social adoption of the mobile, the social shaping if you will, is that mobile phone usage is driven by a form of resistance, a resistance against a particular form of spatio-social hierarchy: in this light mobile devices are the weapons of a contemporary revolution. In sum, Ito's thesis is that teenagers are using mobile technology as a way of achieving a partial if not complete reformation of the intersection of time and space. Being in touch any time any place is thus a technique for adjusting the basic foundations of social relations.

The problem I have with this argument is not whether there are aspects of teenagers life that this captures, it is rather whether the balance of this characterisation is right. The question of empirical adequacy is somewhat obscured by the theoretical apparatus brought to bear. Space certainly is and will continue to be a matter of concern to teenagers as indeed it will be for all other social groups, but it seems to me also that this must be first and foremost a matter for them rather than something highlighted by a theoretical model. Just how this is so for them, however, I am not sure is captured by Ito. I fear I learn more about the theory than I learn about the teenagers themselves.

The reason for my uneasiness is partly to do with the fact that the evidence that Ito does bring to bear, particularly in the later part of her paper where she explores how teenagers undertake turn-taking, as well as in her accounts of how they try and get out of view of their parents, suggests to me that Japanese teenagers are very like European teenagers, including British ones. There is an awful familiarity to it. And yet given this, I do not see how her claims about power geometries helps explain or adequately characterise this life. It captures some of it but not all. Moreover, as an all encompassing theoretic approach it does not fit the overall balance of evidence about teenage life we have been gathering n our own research. And finally it does not fit with my own experience as a teenager.

Grasping experience: capturing the gestalt of a life

I am arguing that one cannot doubt that teenagers do find mobiles useful tools in their lives. Nor can one doubt that they provide a sense of energy, of access, almost freedom that does make the walls of their individual bedrooms seem, somehow, less solid. But it

seems to me also that mobile phones are only enabling in new form what teenagers have always sought to do, and in the past they have done this in various other ways, some technologically mediated and some imaginatively.

For example, one can imagine how in the past teenagers would often wonder what their friends were up to, and would have to exercise their imagination to figure this out. Now, in contrast, they can call or text them. Of course one should remind oneself that what they will find when they make this call is not something that will surprise: they will probably discover that their friends are lurking in their bedrooms, sulking about too much homework and yearning to be elsewhere. It would have taken little imagination to come to the same discovery without a mobile.

The empirical spaces in which any mobile phone call is made notwithstanding, this way of approaching the topic, how to get to teenage experience, begs the question of how one might capture this experience. I do not think the answer to this entails embarking on some laborious definition of the nature of a soul or a personality or a social actor. Nor do I think we need pungently expressed theoretical models such as the idea of power geometries. I think we need to simply point towards very much more prosaic and if you will common sense, every day understandings of individual experience. These will provide sufficient resources to begin the task of characterising teenage life.

From this view, a person's experience is in part related to their experience as an actor within a network of friends, acquaintances and family. This network somehow exists in

the present, the past and the future. Oddly the one that is most difficult here is the present. For in this view the past is done and understood, the only task being to provide tools to ensure its memory; the future is yet to be made and is thus subject to the prospect of control; but the present is ambiguous and possibly uncontrollable. It is so in the following sense and it is this sense that the particular form of experience characteristic of teenagers within this network is brought to the foreground. This is because and, as we noted above, one of the prospects that taunts teenagers is the possibility that others are doing something that is more interesting than what they are doing: not in the future but in the here and now when it might be too late to do anything about it.

The particularities of teenage experience aside, the point here is that the nature of social experience is in part captured by recalling that individuals create a mental picture of the world, one which captures where they are, where others are and where both they and those others have been and will go. All people do this in various ways; it is perhaps Alfred Schutz who explores this most thoroughly. The centre of this experience, the heart if you will of this gestalt, is the individual, and the measure of this world is how encompassing it is, how many people populate it, how many memories it carries and what prospects it holds for the future.

According to this view, the trouble with teenagers is that their attempts to create this world are rather poor: their attempts to do so are amateur, indeed, by definition adolescent. Instead of say, creating a mental space through conversation and interchange with people of different perspectives and social positions, for example, they solidify their

parochialism by intensifying their experience of a world populated solely by those in identical positions, by people of the same age, the same sex, the same class at school, and the same geographic area. And they do this through idleness, insouciance, and purposeless endeavours: they just 'hang out' with their mobile in just the same that they used to hang out on street corners before. There is therefore no surprise that there is a tension at the heart of this experience, a tension having to do with how the character of these individuals matures, grows, develops and moves beyond this self inflicted myopia, this adolescence.

How is this achieved? Is this achieved through constant connectivity to one's fellow teenagers? Does an adolescent get more mature by being able to text all day and all of the night? Does being able to talk from one's own bedroom with one's fellow teenagers in their bedrooms lead one to grow up?

It seems to me that many of the theoretical apparatus used to explore teenage use of SMS obscures this issue. For example, the idea of transcending power geometries, irrespective of the specifics of the geometries in question, is not very helpful when it comes to this issue of growing up. After all, the point being made is that teenagers have always, despite their best efforts, eventually grown up: and the question is how does one convey the experience of this? It is all very well to say that various theory driven enterprises don't do the job—so what does?

The cost of mobile phones versus costs in the general

I have suggested that two metrics might be used to explore and document some of the experiences we are seeking; these metrics concern the teenagers themselves and those they live with. By selecting two it should be clear that I am not proposing to explore every dimension of teenage life; that would too ambitious, even if possible, which I doubt. These two are selected because of their salience in our data and because they illustrate the importance of matters which are simply left out by much of the research on teenagers.

With this in mind, I now want to turn to some data collected with various colleagues on the evolution of fixed and mobile phones in family life. This research is part of an ongoing series of projects with a major mobile network operator in the UK, and entailed dairy studies and interviews of households in the UK and Sweden. Some 59 persons where interviewed and monitored, populating some 21 households. All had both mobile and fixed lines available. The research focused on the grounds for the use of either.

The assumption that has governed mobile operator strategy on the fixed and the mobile has been that cost is and will remain the primary driver. Since mobile operators have been able to charge a premium for their technology outside of the home they see no reason to reduce that premium to make a success of mobiles in the home. Our research was meant to identify ways in which they could leverage new opportunities without having to reduce their premium charging.

Our research showed that cost, though often mentioned as the key driver, especially in interviews and focus groups, rarely drove actual behaviour. Other factors, like use of the 'virtual address book' on a mobile, the convenience and ease of use of the respective devices , their handiness as well as matters of habit were all more important.

Without going in to the details of all the findings, there was one issue that was particularly interesting. This related to the fact that the cost of mobile phones was indeed something that people were conscious of, but that the issue of this cost was not viewed as something that could be thought of separately from other kinds of costs. The costs of mobiles stood testament to costs in the general.

Let me recount one interview with a father in a UK household which conveys the gist of what I mean.

"You know mobile phone bills are about the only thing I can talk to my daughters about when want I really want to talk to them about is not eating things out of the fridge and not telling anyone. I mean, they have got to learn that there are other people in the house and the only way I can think of making them do this is by having a talk about mobile phone bills and then I can talk to them about money and living together and sharing things without coming across as pompous, like some Victorian patriach"

What was getting at here? Was he wanting to exercise his monopoly of power over the space of the home? Or was he simply a little eccentric and somewhat rigid, unable to cope with the idea that kids don't worry about expense? I would like to suggest that he

was simply being a normal adult, an ordinary run-of-the-mill dad trying to figure out how to help his kids grow up. Part of doing so has to do with learning the ropes of sharing a household: and this entails much more than is conveyed by the term power geometries.

A vignette of family life

Let me explain this more carefully again by reference to this particular family. When the mobile phone bills —or direct debit statements to be precise—arrived, this dad would pick them up and open them, and leave them around for his two girls —late teenagers— to bump in to. He would put them on the kitchen table or on the fridge so that he could guarantee they would see them . They would thus not only be aware of their existence but would be also aware that 'Dad had put them there since he wants to lecture us'.

He was not, however, concerned with the size of the phone bills. As he put it, 'That's up to them'. His concern was to discuss how the respective phone bills identified certain behavours which he viewed as irresponsible, and these costs may have had noting to do with the mobile phones themselves.

As a case in point, he had noted that when the girls where both at home (one had just started at University and had been home for two periods of holiday), his own fixed line phone bill went up substantially. His phone statement showed that this was primarily because of calls to mobile phones rather than to other fixed lines. Now, his concern was that for many of these calls it would have been cheaper had they been made from a mobile on the same network. He believed also that in many cases the girl's own phones

were on the right networks for this. He believed it was the girls who chose to make the calls on the fixed line not simply or even partly because they knew their dad was paying, but because they couldn't be bothered to find their own phone. Their costly behaviour was simply irresponsible behaviour.

The reason why he wanted to talk with the girls, then, was that he did not necessarily mind paying bills, including their own, but he did mind paying bills unnecessarily. Bills could be reduced if individuals thought about the overall economy of the family. For him the issue was that the girls treated expenditure as primarily individual rather than collaborative matter, and so they did not act in a way that reflected concern for others. In crude terms, if the girls recognised that some costs were shared then he believed that their behaviour would be different. Their use of the fixed line phone when a mobile would have been cheaper would have been an instance of this. By addressing this behaviour he hoped that the girls would adjust their behaviour for all shared matters in the house, whatever it might be. To be able to conduct oneself with respect to others was matter of vastly more important than the actual costs of something in particular. It was, if you like, a question of morality.

Now the term power geometries might seem a nice fit for helping explore the issues here: after all there is clearly a difference in power between the dad and his daughters, especially over economics matters, or, more bluntly, over who had the most cash. But my concern with power geometries is not that it is wrong; it is that I don't think it is helpful when trying to capture or generate an insightful and balanced view of teenage experience.

There is no news in saying that dads have more power than their teenage daughters, and if the goal of sociology is to merely repeat what one might call common sense knowledge then it would have withered long ago. No, the purpose is to prise open the nature of social experience and unpack it in to elements so that we can see it more clearly, and sometimes in new light. All this has to be done without compromising a concrete sense of the experience in question and without ensuring that balance that I've mentioned.

To illustrate this let me provide another example of the intercourse between father and daughters in this house. If the first example was about money and thus obviously about power, this second example is about altogether different matters. As part of each study, several visits were undertaken; during the first the cost of fixed to mobile came up. In a later visit, a very different yet oddly related topic came up. *"Look this sounds daft but I had some sausages in the fridge to make dinner and when I went to the fridge I found that (one of his daughters) had eaten them, well at least it must have been her. Now, they are only sausages—though they were special ones I had bought—and I don't mind them eating them but now there isn't anything to cook and I don't want to go up to (the nearest supermarket)."*

We saw in the first example that the father did not worry too much about mobile phone bills but their arrival was the only pretext he could think of that would enable him to get the girls to sit down over diner and have, as he put it, 'a rational conversation' about learning to share. In the instance he is reporting here, his real agenda was about the sausages, but he felt that the issue of sausages per se would be simply laughed at by his

girls. He was probably right. Yet, only through addressing a matter that they thought was potentially serious, namely phone bills, could he indirectly address matters that they thought were inconsequential though he thought symbolic. In short, he wanted to use conversations as regards mobile phone bills to raise the possibility that that might start behaving in different ways as regards other matters.

One might put this in a larger context: when these teenagers had been children, they might have simply taken without asking and used without commenting, as they were getting older and, presumably, as leaving home became increasingly imminent, he wanted them to start living in a manner where shared responsibility was the norm. His view was that part of moving on from being a teenager has to do with the ability of taking on responsibility. One of these responsibilities is for household bills; another has to do with consumption of shared goods, like groceries. The girls should cease behaving with little or no concern for others in the same space; they should start considering how their own behaviours would affect others. In a phrase, he simply wanted his girls to start being like adults: recognising that if the fridge was stripped of food then others in the house might be left hungry by the end of day, having planned to eat that same food.

Nothing sinister was meant here nor yet can one accurately capture it by describing it as the exercise of an oppressive power. I have deliberately chosen this example as a way of highlighting the fact that the experience of teenagers is an essentially prosaic affair. When Ito talks about power geometries what this implies is a great drama, a battle of sorts between those who have and those who do not. But what we find when one looks

more carefully and with a sensitivity to what actually goes on, is an ordinary, everyday world. Here is no melodrama, just the tiresome battle between adults trying to get teenagers to be less selfish. Of course at times this battle can take on the appearance of a melodrama, especially from the perspective of the teenagers: but this serves only to further underline my point: not a real drama but a false drama, not real battles over social structure but squabbles over sausages.

The social propriety of texting

The rub of the matter, then, for these teenagers and the household that they were part of is the difficult, socially organised process of movement from one social role to another. Here a father is trying to facilitate that in the best way he can; though doubtless his daughters thought his efforts at best harmless, at worse tiresome; almost certainly his actions caused them to giggle. But this change in social status is not solely achieved through the coercion and benign encouragement of others; teenagers also contribute to it themselves, albeit that the way they do so—and the manifest consequence of this achievement—may not be so visible to themselves.

I will do this by addressing the issue of turn-taking on mobile communications, texting being one genre of these communications. I will make a similar argument about the question of the social shift in the competence of teenagers, but will show in this case that the adoption of various socially accepted patterns of mobile phone use are closely related to age differences in teenagers: eighteen year olds being systematically more sophisticated (in their own terms) than thirteen year olds.

I will explain that the prosody of calling and answering, of content and topic management with mobiles, becomes increasingly artful as teenagers age, so much so that after a certain age, an inability to manage these issues gracefully is viewed as a measure of immaturity. In other words, as they grow, teenagers themselves start behaving in ways that distinguishes those who are becoming adult and those who are not. These skills and competences have to do with the social rituals of when to address some one, how to address some one, and what to say. These are at once ornate yet everyday, prosaic yet artful. They are about the socially achieved skills of ensuring the appropriate intersections of time, place, content and persons.

If we return now to Ito's work we find that she reports that one of the skills that Japanese teenagers learn is to use spatial matters as a resource for managing the social etiquette of communication. She cites various examples of how teenagers will end a phone call on the bus when that bus is about to reach the stop they want to use; they tell a friend to stop texting when they are about to enter a class.

Now, the important issue here is that in the instances she cites the possibility that these relationships between space and action are contingent and arbitrarily appropriated comes to mind. That is to say, that when one reads Ito's piece, one begins to think that perhaps the teenagers were not saying to their friends "Oh the bus stop is near!" because it really was near; it was rather that they were using the bus stop as an excuse to manage the call. After all, one of the properties of mobile communications is that physical and spatial

matters that might impact upon the management of conversation are not equally

distributed.

Thus the caller may have no knowledge as to whether the person they are calling is

indeed about to enter a class room or get off a bus. Of course it is certainly true that the

caller may have some information: the noise of traffic for example, may indicate that the

person called is indeed on a bus; the screeching and bellowing of kids may suggest that

the one they are calling is loitering outside a class room. But these resources are at once

an indication, auditory clues if you like, that the caller may invoke: "Oh are you about to

go into class?" one can hear them say. But they are ultimately the tools of the one who is

in that location: it is only they who can deny that it is the sound of kids, and say perhaps

that their TV is on; it is only they who can say that they are walking down the street when

in fact they are on a bus. They cannot dissemble too aggressively needless to say since

that would be bring in to doubt their accounts; the point is that this imbalance of what

might call local knowledge (or situated knowledge), is such that it provides an easy to

resource for managing the process of calling.

Why is this resource needed? Why do they need to 'manage calls'? This almost sounds

like adults worrying about saying the 'right thing', hardly a concern that one would

imagine teenagers to fret about. Yet what Ito suggests, and indeed much of the other

research on teenage life confirms, is that teenagers do indeed worry about this though this

worrying is graded and structured according to age.

Crudely speaking, new users don't know how to manage mobile calls at all, and this results in them using the phones excessively, and it is only gradually as they age from the impressive heights of the first year of teenagerdoom towards the middle and later teens that these skills become more astute and refined.

These skills have many forms and their evolution is itself a measure of the general social skills of the individual in question. In Kaseniemi's 'Mobile Message' ( ) for example, teenagers report how tiresome they find friends who have just got their first mobile: apparently they phone and text all the time. Once they have got over this excitement they start to use the devices more 'appropriately', we are told.

What this means is itself variable and complex. The same set of subjects report differences in the behaviour of the two genders: girls treat what they share and exchange over the mobile as more private than boys. So girls modulate what they say according to the gender of the person they are calling.

In our own research corpus, and as we have remarked upon extensively (See), there are ritual communications that need to be undertaken when girls and boys are going out together: the goodnight text sent from a boy to a girl last thing at night is now a social requirement, for example. Failure to deliver the message results in a summons the following morning in the playground. Sending a steady stream of little notes throughout the school day is too a measure of devotion and adoration; the absence of the same is an indication that an 'item' (an idiomatic label for a couple) are not what they once were.

All these little differences, in content, in the frequency of calls, in who is calling who and so on, are in sense not only visible to those involved and merely matters of private moment; they are also matters of public interest since all are subject to the same patterns, exchanges, and rituals. Boys complain to other boys about the oppressive need to send goodnight texts; girls about the slovenly failure of the boys to send them, and so forth.

These patterns are of course somewhat varied with different codes being applicable in different societies and cultures: in Japan for example, we are told by Riviere & Liccoppe ( ) that texting is used between persons of different social status so as to avoid the faux pas of interruption; between intimates such as husband and wife, no such fear is present and thus voice calls are made any time day or night. In contrast, in France, texting is used not so much to avoid the problem of interruption as to avoid the possibility of emotional violence that goes with close relationships: thus girls would prefer to text their complaints to a boyfriend since this would not result in a physical outburst from that same boy; the boys prefer to text their own concerns since the girls don't respond with tears and weeping. Somehow text not only avoids these all too real physical reactions being seen; they also make them less likely to happen: Girls apparently find themselves less weepy when they communicate with texts; boys less prone to violence.

Now I don't want to comment on what this says about the respective cultures, these being matters properly addressed in the papers in question. The point I am trying to draw here is that teenagers begin to develop fairly elaborate patterns for mobile communication

amongst themselves and these patterns slowly encrustate as they get older: what was accepted when thirteen is laughed at and a source of embarrassment by the time they are eighteen.

Who is talking to who

This is drawing attention to the self-accomplished sophistication of teenagers, a sophistication as regards the who, the when and the what of mobile connectivity. I now want to focus in particular on one aspect of this patterning of communication. I will do this by once again referring to our research on home life.

We found that one of the reasons why teenagers like to use the mobile when calling from their home, and one of the reasons why they like to call a mobile rather than a fixed line, is that thereby they can guarantee who they will end up talking to. One the one hand, the receiver of a call can see the name of the caller, presented through the functioning of the virtual address book entry associated with that number; and on the other, the caller can guarantee that by they will speak to the right person. For a mobile phone is, despite what we have said above, one of those articles that remains essentially one person's sole responsibility. Thus a call to that person's mobile will not be answered by someone else, but only by that person. By contrast a call to a fixed line could summon anyone within the space in which that fixed line phone rings.

What is interesting about this is partly how teenagers in particular are loath to speak with their friend's families. "Oh they are so awkward", as one of our respondents remarked.

Apparently teenager-parent conversation, whether they be within a family or across families are always difficult.

Another perhaps more interesting issue has to do with how the virtual address book, when combined with the assumption that only one person has rights to answer a mobile phone, creates what one might call a tight coupling of social systems of propriety and technology. For in much of our other work, on teenagers gifting for example ( ), as well as in our research on home life, the power of the virtual address book as a tool and instrument to manage the ritual patterns of human communication is paramount. This is highlighted by the fact that when someone no longer wishes to communicate with another, as in the case of a girl breaking up with a boy, the name of the person out of favour is ceremoniously—one might almost say ritually—deleted from the address book. This does not inhibit that person calling that phone but it does mean that when the call is made no name comes up on the screen: it is the summons of an anonymous person.

Now, it might seem natural to answer any and every call whoever makes it, and indeed this has been habitually the case with users of fixed line telephony, but with mobiles and with the technological infrastructure that provides caller line identification, the phone's themselves are now used to let the recipients of a call determine whether they wish to answer or not. They do so by grading their decisions according to social rights. People who have the right to call have this right embedded in their 'presence' in the address book: those who do not have this demonstrated by their exclusion from the address book.

Membership and exclusion is not permanent; it is flexible and is dependent upon the state of relationship between two persons.

What is curious and at once delightfully anachronistic about this is that teenagers, especially as they grow toward late teens, use this link of the virtual and the real to manage the details of their phone communications in ways that appears extraordinarily rigid. They really do avoid answering calls that don't have a caller ID. They do so on the grounds that it might be some one that they have excluded from their address book. In short, instead of being available to contact by anyone at any time, which is surely what the technology was posited to provide, in practice teenagers constrain their social worlds to those who have a right to contact them and exclude those who do not. This severely managed social intercourse is, it seems to me, redolent of high class Victorian propriety, where visitors would not be accepted in to a drawing room unless they provided a card first, and this card would then enable the host to decide whether that caller had rights of access or not. How strange then that today, in the 21st century, this is what teenagers rely on: they use a technology to bolster the very social practices that, one would imagine, they would laugh at and mock if they saw it in their parents.

Conclusion

This is what one finds not only in our research but others too: in Finland (Kopomaa,), Norway (Bakken,); Germany (Hoflich & Gebhart,), the Philipinnes (Ellwood-Clayton), and many other places too. The technologies are indeed allowing teenagers to work at their relationships more energetically than they might have done before. They are also

allowing them to embody what might have hitherto been unfilled thoughts, ideas and ambitions about who can and cannot contact them. The social systems that result are at once complex, subtle, highly graded and rigid: and this is the work not of those who have power over teenagers, it is they themselves who create these tongue-tied processes.

Even so, this social world (and the patterns that constitute it), is endemically threatened by teenagers themselves: they make confused and often hazardous judgements about who should be in their address book and who should not; on when they should send a text and when they should not, and so on. Their judgements on these matters often conflicts with the occasionally more sophisticated judgements of others including, on occasion, their fellow teenagers, most especially when these teenagers are of a different age and level of familiarity with mobile communications. In short, it is a world made up of complex and definable rules, but the ability of teenagers to act upon them in socially sanctioned ways is highly variable and often very faltering. But though this moral order is one of their own making, one should not be surprised that this occurs—they are teenagers after all.

This brings me back to the issue of how to tackle the nature of teenage life and to convey and explore the texture of their experiences. I have argued that some terms used to help do this can—unintentionally I am sure— distract from the very matters that need to be looked at carefully. In the first empirical section of the paper, where I addressed cost, the idea of power geometries, I suggested, can lead one to forget that the actual battles that constitute aspects of teenage existence are far more prosaic that the term evokes. In the second section of the paper what we have seen is that it can be, in certain regards, the

teenagers themselves who act to create power geometries but the geometries in question are not those alluded to by Massey's arguments or Ito's interpretation of them, they are as we say, to do with the willingness to allow others to summons oneself, and ideas about when 'enough is enough'.

It is not only terms like power geometries that can lead the analyst to get unstuck but concepts that follow on from such a term, such as 'surveillance' and 'resistance'. These too imply certain sorts of topics and concerns which, it seems to me, are all too likely to distract attention from the actual experience and practices of teenagers themselves. It is the moral order of those experiences that I believe we ought to be seeking to uncover in studies of mobile use, whatever that moral order is, and even if it does fly in the face of our sociological convictions about, say, class, power, gender and the rest. This moral order should be the focus of concern not only for studies of the often painful and oddly rigid practices of teenagers, but for any and all social groups wishing to use and exploit mobile phones. The world is out there, beyond the walls of our academic establishments, if only we have the imagination to see it.

References

(To follow)