



In what ways do the media we shape, shape us in return?

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The concept of young people being negatively affected by the ubiquitous mobile telephone (“mobile”), has taken firm hold in the public consciousness. Unfortunately, an instrument blaming perspective fails to consider the relational issues involved. Questions of how we are both shaped by and shape our technologies are neglected when questions collapse to binaries of good or bad. This paper draws on the work of French sociologist Bruno Latour as a means to understanding the discourse positioning the mobile as an object of harm, and for strategies considering how the mobile might be positioned otherwise. In an attempt to redress the negative evaluative imbalance associated with mobile phones, an example taken from research in progress involving Youthline’s text messaging for counselling is explored. Implications for teaching and learning are suggested, including strategies for text messaging and for positioning the mobile as an adjunctive instrument supporting students through their studies.

Keywords: M-learning, text counselling, sms counselling, technical mediation

Background

The dangers of mobile phones are reported repeatedly. A sample of news reports in 2009 suggests the risks include headaches, insomnia, and anxiety (Public Radio International, 2009), memory loss and delayed reaction times (Levitt, 2009), alterations in brain function and brain tumours (T. Fullerton, 2009), car accidents (Tiffen, 2009), infertility (ITVnews, 2009), addictions (Cooper, 2009; Familiar, 2009; Phillippe, 2009), and ‘nomo’ phobia (Park, 2009; Phillippe, 2009). In addition to these effects, texting by mobile phones is also linked to repetitive strain injury (Public Radio International, 2009), failing literacy skills (Familiar, 2009), impaired social skills (Familiar, 2009), sexual exploitation (Neville, 2009), text-bullying (S. Fullerton, 2009; Phillippe, 2009), as well as delayed emotional development with alterations in the expression of emotions and impaired intimacy and autonomy (Sherry Turkle, interview broadcast on Public Radio International, 2009). However, since the media hype extends to ‘rewiring brains to be more careless’ (Barton, 2009), and ‘zombiism’ (Park, 2009), I suggest the ubiquitous mobile phone has been maligned as a weapon of mass destruction and aligned with a similar level of moral panic.

It is not the intent of this paper to evaluate the veracity of each of these claims, there has been an extensive review of the physical effects secondary to mobile phone use undertaken by the EC Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) (2007). This report concluded no significant health effect had been demonstrated from electromagnetic fields (EMF) associated with mobile phones or mobile phone towers at normal levels of exposure. SCENIHR continues to monitor the longitudinal effects but to date, there is no threat from EMF that would support the media reports. The mobile phone has not been shown to be an unsafe entity, concerns might then turn to considering the users of mobile phones, and the relationships they have that are mediated through mobiles.

A sociological exploration of technical mediation

That the discourse about mobile phone use is overwhelmingly negative is worth questioning further for the negative evaluative connotations associated create a path marginalising this device further from educational contexts. It remains more common that schools admonish mobile phones to be ‘invisible, inaudible or in the office’ than to support their applications for teaching and learning. In higher education

inclusion of mobile phones within the teaching and learning environment remain the exception. The potential to explore positive applications is commonly denied. The inclination to understand how technology mediates relationships is diminished. We become shaped by our fears. This could, of course, be otherwise.

The mobile needs to be considered in a more reasoned way. Latour (2005) would have us ask “Who else is acting when we act? Who else is present? Why are we held by forces not of our own making?” Such questions would allow for reflection on choices, actions, and our relationships with things as well as with people. Asking such questions of our relationships with mobile phones gives voice to other possibilities. If we were to accept that moral panic influenced the place of mobile phones in education settings, we might reconsider their place. Instead of the relegated underground existence negotiated by mobile phone users, a curiosity might be invoked to explore issues of relationality; how we are mediated or influenced by the things and technologies we encounter.

Latour (1994) provides us with an argument addressing material relationality where he explores how a gun alters how we relate. His discussion revolves around the argument of whether guns kill people, or whether people kill people and guns are but the tools. If we separate out the possible, but yet to be proven, effects of EMF, and focus on relational effects such as text bullying, we can see that the mobile of its own accord does no harm. Messages are not generated without the mobile having joined with a person. It would also not be possible for a person to cause harm such as is seen in text bullying without the reach afforded by the mobile phone as the mobile provides text forwarding options and cheap transaction costs contributing to rapid and wide dissemination. In considering the transaction costs, I am identifying not just the economics that make it affordable, but also the absence of face, of being available to face the reactions caused, and being held accountable for the reaction provoked. The anonymity provided contributes to a lowered transaction cost, a construct described further by Clay Shirky (2008). Drawing on the tenets of economics, Shirky identifies that people respond to incentives. “If you give them more of a reason to do something, they will do more of it, and if you make it easier to do more of something they are already inclined to do, they will also do more of it.” (p18). Unfortunately, in this instance, in these times, the result is bullying made easy. Understanding what contributes provides possibility for considering what might be done differently. The lesson from relationality is that: ‘I’ am altered when ‘I’ becomes ‘I + mobile phone’ and similarly, ‘the mobile phone’ is altered when ‘the mobile phone’ becomes ‘the mobile phone + person’.

Rather than attributing to the device deterministic qualities of ruination, where the mobile phone is blamed for text bullying; or suggesting that users are psychologically deranged and would be bullies with or without the tools of their trade, a more fruitful direction for further research could be in studying how cheap transaction costs might be altered. Teaching relationality and its impact is one possibility. Strategies currently negotiated between Vodafone, Telecom and Netsafe to combat text bullying might also be looked at in terms of how they alter the relationality involved; the newest strategies involve ease in lodging a complaint by text, at no cost, as simple as “TXT the word ‘bully’ to 4001 and the service provider will be in touch and investigate. Options then extend to warning the bully, stopping TXTing from their account, temporarily barring their account or even permanently deactivating their account.” Such acts can be seen as interfering with the anonymity assumed and raises the transaction costs such that anonymity and ongoing phone access are prevented.

To further explore relationality, this paper draws on some of the initial findings of a larger study undertaken by the author into change and the applications of emergent technologies in a youth telephone-counselling centre (Youthline New Zealand, named with permission). This organisation began using text messaging, as a medium for counselling, in December 2004. This shift was less by design and more by good intent; a TXT capable palmpilot was provided as a generous Christmas gift by a company replacing Christmas cards with social giving. For an organisation whose vision is to be relevant to young people, meeting with them in the environments that they are in, and using the media they elect to use, the gift was a desirable one. However, as with all change, implications for practice are sometimes anticipated and sometimes not. This paper explores some of the findings when a practice dependent on relating is squeezed onto a small screen, a window of opportunity approximately 3cm by 3cm, that imposes limits on each utterance to 160 characters or less, and where those involved are rendered silent and invisible.

Findings

Two University ethics committees; Deakin University in Melbourne, and the Auckland University of Technology have approved this research. Given the sensitivities involved in the research undertaken, examples drawn will be indicative, rather than actual, examples of text counselling. Identifying

information has been removed and the content altered to protect the anonymity of those involved.

In relating through the chosen medium of mobiles, there is the perception of invisibility, and taking this further into the medium of texting there is further disembodiment with being personally invisible and inaudible. In relating through text, how we relate becomes mediated by the technology involved; what might not be possible when there is just 'me' involved, becomes possible when it is 'me mediated by texting'. This is demonstrated in the following text counselling interaction:

Hi not relly sure
bot this, my dad
died and im not 2
sur bout thngs
every1 seems 2 hav
it 2getha. Im a reck
 Hey thr,snds like ur
 gng thru a prty tuff
 time at the momnt.
 Sorry 2 hear
 tht ur feeln tht
 evry1 else seems 2
 b copin, xcpt fr u
Seems tht way,they
al hav it 2getha and i
js cant stop crying..
Snds stupid I kno
 Its ok 2 cry n be
 sad abt losin ur dad.
 Ppl r all differnt wif
 ways they react
I dnt knw.Mayb I jst
bein silli I dnt even
knw why I txt ths,u
cnt chnge anythn
 We cnt change it, but
 we can offr supprt n b
 here to txt n tlk 2.
Crazy he was sick 4
2yrs, u thnk I wld
get used 2 the idea
I knew it was gonna hapn
 Knowin tht it wld happn
 an actually facn it can be
 very different. It's a big
 chnge nt havn him ther
 anymore.
Icnt bleve hes realy
gne.I feel realy weird
with him not here
 Cn undastand that u
 feel tht way.hav u
 been able 2 tlk wif
 any1 bt how ur feeln
Nah talkn out loud
makes it real n I jus
wanna go slo.Thnx

Discussion

What happens when there is disembodiment is that absence makes presence possible. Not being seen or heard affords not only anonymity but also permission to not 'hold it all together'. There is a sense that it is possible to be heard and understood and not have to perform in a socially accepted way; that for someone already feeling vulnerable there is no risk of being judged negatively because of the tears. In this

instance, we could consider the lowered transaction costs as maintaining a fragile sense of self. Being mediated by the technology allowed for being able to ask for help and there is choice in how much is disclosed because of the invisibility and inaudibility afforded.

The obvious constraints of the medium are the parameters of each message being not more than 160 characters, however this does not preclude a counselling conversation occurring. The medium far from creating a sterile environment bereft of emotional content, is demonstrated as allowing for emotions to be shared that might not be otherwise. The assemblage of person with technology reconfigures not only the writing but also the writer; what is read and also the reader. It is not only the mobile that is being pushed and pulled to new purposes, those texting are similarly moulded, and so too is the very human art of counselling.

Within the example portrayed it is possible to point to the empathy, active listening, reflection, and affirming that occurred, these are generic communication skills not restricted to the counselling context. With texting being a preferred medium of young people, Youthline's use of texting demonstrates that this much maligned medium can be used constructively even on the most sensitive of matters. A texting medium, as demonstrated, does not preclude the very human art of reaching out and being there for someone.

Future research

In both education and counselling are the shared goals of making a meaningful and positive difference through the interactions established. Both require consideration for how relationships are formed, maintained, and negotiated, through changing media. Moving from an information age to one defined as conceptual (Pink, 2005) suggests an increasing focus on relational aspects would be beneficial, a timely consideration then for how we relate to each other, and consideration for the ways in which we are mediated in relationships with our technologies. This paper does not discuss the rights or wrongs of such practice and has instead maintained a focus on the relational aspects. Consideration has focused on the shaping that occurs when practice is constrained by the preferred means of relating as chosen by young people and contained by the 3cm by 3cm space, the 160 characters imposed on each utterance, as well as the altering effects of being present, albeit invisible and inaudible. This paper suggests further research specific to the mediation effects of the technologies involved in teaching and learning purposes would be of value in exploring how teaching practices might similarly be constrained, contained and constructed.

Conclusion

The initial findings outlined above, demonstrate that the relational aspects are worth exploring further. In attempting to redress the negative evaluative position currently projected onto mobile phone use, and particularly with regard to texting, I have presented an application demonstrating positive value in use of the medium, albeit within counselling. Relevance to the teaching and learning environment includes sharing knowledge of a support service particularly relevant to young people who elect to use a text medium. The example demonstrating use of communication skills within a sensitive area suggests that there are also possibilities for other people whose interactions draw them into the realms of text messaging to be creative in crafting their practice. The potential is that practice might be shaped positively, by positive aspirations rather than by fears. This paper has argued for moving the mobile phone from a relegated position to a central topic for discussion to consider technology mediation effects; to look at the relationships we have with each other and how we are mediated in these relationships by the tools that either we, or the students we work with, elect to use.

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