

The mobile phone and the dynamic between private and public communication: Results of an international exploratory study

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The mobile phone as an “indiscreet medium”

The relationship between private and public is not static. There are numerous influences on the continuing redefinition of what constitutes private and public. Not least amongst these are the media, who contribute to a shifting of boundaries, or at least intensify such developments. In this respect the media not only leave their own mark but at the same time are themselves marked in a recursive sense. If there is a tendency towards a “tyranny of intimacy” as noted by Sennett (1990), then the media, first and foremost the mass media, play no small part (*Big Brother* being just one prominent example). The private, even the intimate, is exposed to the full gaze of the public eye. How great an impact the media exert on the direction of daily life remains to be discussed. However, the shifting of frontiers is now more readily accepted. Sensitivities as to whether and when something constitutes an indiscretion are also likely to change (see Weiß 2002: 68). In the wake of an increasing mediatization of daily life, various media previously based in the home have now been uprooted, for example TV being watched in public places, the Walkman or the mobile Internet.

In this sense the mobile phone is particularly topical, as well as controversial. According to Geoff Cooper (2002: 22), the mobile phone epitomizes an “indiscreet technology”. This refers not only to the fact that this technology involves an indiscreet form of communication, but also that it notably causes the merging of hitherto discrete (i.e. separate) domains or categories—here the public and the private. That which remained hidden when using the phone at home, now becomes accessible to a broad audience; what once took place “backstage” is now

played out “frontstage”.¹ “With the mobile phone, phoning loses its intimacy, the private forces its way into the public sphere” (Burkart 2000: 218). It may even be possible under certain circumstances to use the telephone in public with fewer disruptions than at home. This is one attraction of the mobile phone, not least for young people, as it allows them to use the telephone beyond the parental sphere (thereby circumventing parental control). Occasionally this may also make it particularly attractive for someone to appear in public because it allows them to become the centre of attention—the mobile phone is used here as a means of manoeuvring oneself frontstage.

The mobile phone—Private and public

The mobile phone openly contributes to a privatization of the public arena, for instance where private or even intimate subjects are involved. It is an especially private medium because the network of linked media consists at its core of people who already know each other or who might even be connected by strong personal relationships. This is illustrated by the fact that only a limited circle of people have the user’s mobile phone number: these numbers are not normally listed in the phone book, which in itself makes them private. “This means that the mobile enables people to find and to be found by those closest to them, in other words by a very limited social network. [...] Only this network is given permission to call, while actually reciprocal and official access is not allowed to subscribers as a whole” (Fortunati 2002a: 524). When the mobile phone enters the public sphere, it is simultaneously transformed into something private, with the consequence of an “uncontrolled appropriation of public space” (Fortunati 2002a: 522; see also Kopomaa 2000: 92–93). Phone users retreat from a given situation and form a kind of communicative island by looking for a hideaway where they can talk without being disturbed—a type of “improvised open-air wireless phone booth” (Lasen 2003: 19). This also means that they temporarily absent themselves from the actuality of their present situation. Other people may be ignored. Whether this can be reciprocated is another matter: third parties present are forced to listen to the phone conversation, even though they only hear one side of it. Not least through its obtrusiveness, the mobile phone disturbs the order of public communication; its ringing alone represents a nuisance. This becomes even more of a problem as familiar arrangements of closeness and distance are upset.

For life in big cities, in particular, we face having to create distance on a daily basis despite, or indeed because of, conditions of close

1. For the distinction between frontstage and backstage see Goffman (1969: 99 ff.).

proximity. Bahrdr (1969: 79) notes: "The distance between individuals, and between the individual and the totality inherent in the public sphere, is not only a negative condition necessitating the forms of integration of the public sphere, but also a constitutive factor. Public life owes much to its specific dynamism, vividness, variety and consciousness." In this respect, with a "carefully upheld distance", personality does not appear as a "whole", but only as one part of it. Avoiding awkward situations also means holding back personal matters not intended for others, and which would in this respect also disturb those in contact with them (see Bahrdr 1969: 66). Georg Simmel (1995: 123) talks about a reserve peculiar to the city dweller, resulting in "distances and steering clear", without which life as lived in the big city would not be possible. Part of this maintenance of distance, despite the close proximity that constitutes public life, is also what Richard Sennett calls "civility". By this Sennett means behaviour that protects people from each other and at the same time enables them to find pleasure in the company of others—civility aims at sparing others the burden of one's own self (Sennett 1990: 335). On the other hand, says Sennett (1990: 336), lack of civility means the opposite behaviour: namely burdening others with one's own self. But this is not just about keeping others at a distance or keeping our distance from others, but also about adequately dealing with situations of close proximity. For example, one mechanism that comes into force first and foremost in situations where we are within earshot of others is termed "civil inattention" by Erving Goffman. This does not mean ignoring others but acting as if they were of no interest, as if we (even if this is not actually the case) were not listening to them (see Goffman 1971a: 85; 1974: 294; 1994: 153).

The mobile phone upsets the established practices of proximity and distance. Parts of one's personality, which otherwise would have stayed hidden, are made accessible to others. In this sense such behaviour "lacks civility" because someone is troubling others, against their will, with the "burden of one's self". With the mobile phone actively forcing close proximity, the arrangements of proximity/distance and of private/public have to be redefined (see Ling 2005). But when the relation between private and public is taken not to be culturally invariant, and furthermore if a culturally different integration of mobile phone use can be expected, then culturally varied outcomes might indeed be expected. In Europe, for instance, there are clear differences in the assessment of locations where it is deemed acceptable for mobile phones to be left on or turned off. The French and Germans, Haddon (1998) reports, are much more likely to regard leaving the mobile phone on in a restaurant as a *faux pas*, compared to the Italians, Spanish or English.

In most cases, comparative studies are geared towards highlighting differences. However, what cultures share also needs to be taken into consideration. One might ask, as Katz et al. (2003: 85): Is there

such a thing as an international mobile phone culture spanning continents? In addition, is there not also an international teenage culture where the mobile phone plays an important role? Are there cultural universals or near-universals in terms of the significance of communication in people's lives?

Results of the exploratory study

Tracing cultural differences and similarities in the use of mobile phones in various European countries was the aim of an interview-based study we conducted between November 2002 and January 2003. This study should be seen in the context of a comprehensive research project focussing on the growing saturation of daily life by telecommunication media, as well as the inherent change in routine communicative practices (see also Höflich/Gebhardt 2003; 2005). The study takes the form of a pilot survey, intended to be complemented in time by additional studies, including areas such as qualitative observational studies of communication behaviour in public places (Höflich 2004). Whilst the research project follows the strategy described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as "grounded theory", it was decided, in contrast to commonly applied current methodology, to use a quantitative study as the starting point of our research. The intention was to obtain early insight into the relationship between private and public communication, and to use the resulting quantitative data to provide the impetus for further, more in-depth qualitative studies.

To approach mobile phone use and the dynamic relationship between public and private communication from a comparative cultural perspective, the question first arises as to which criteria to use in the selection of the respective countries used as the basis for study. In other words, it must be ascertained what "theoretical sampling" the study is based on (see Glaser and Strauss 1967). Whilst this issue is discussed very differently by various sources (see for instance Hantrais 1996; Przeworski/Teune 1970), we have used a selection strategy that follows Przeworski and Teune (1970: 31ff.). This is best defined as a strategy where the relevant countries are selected according to the principle of their greatest possible similarities ("most similar") as well as their greatest possible differences ("most different"). In this way only those countries have been considered that share a wide range of characteristics (for instance social, economic and political structures—though including here also the relative spread of mobile phones), but which on the other hand can be assumed to be significantly different in other characteristics. Eventually, Finland, Germany, Italy and Spain were selected for the study.

Rather than intending to be representative, this exploratory pilot

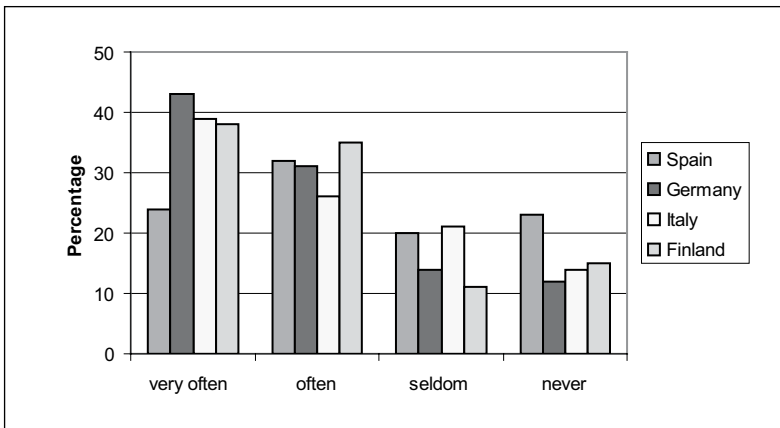
study aims to generate hypotheses. In this way it becomes clear that even if the study refers to the collective communicative behaviour of, say, “the Finns”, “the Germans”, “the Italians” or “the Spanish”, it cannot, and does not wish to, claim to make statements about the inhabitants of these countries in general. The important issue here is an effort to reveal potential areas of difficulty with mobile phone use and the dynamic between private and public communication, in order to obtain possible clues to establish future research studies. An expert workshop held in early 2003 at Erfurt University played a crucial role in the selection of research strategy. The quantitative data we had obtained was discussed with scientists who are experts in the field of mobile communication in the respective countries involved in the study. The aim here was to prevent the risk of too much of an “ethnocentrically” clouded perspective, and in this way to be able to better assess the validity of our data.²

One possible dynamic relationship inherent in mobile phone use in public spaces is outlined in the first instance by who usually uses the mobile phone to talk to whom and about what. This references the potential of the mobile phone to take intimacy out of the home, or, to quote Leopoldina Fortunati (2002b: 49): “This instrument enables us to capture the intimacy of personal relations while moving from one place to another, that is, in a public dimension, traditionally the place of extraneousness in social relations”. Here, the significance of the mobile phone as an intimate means of communication is already shown in its

2. In this context I would like to thank in particular Prof. Leopoldina Fortunati (Italy), Virpi Oksman (Finland) und Prof. Santiago Lorente (Spain), who, through their comments and contributions provided valuable pointers for the interpretation of the data obtained by us. Their respective assessments are reproduced at different points in the form of written quotes from notes taken during the expert panel discussion at Erfurt University. Whilst the interview sample obtained from the respective countries cannot claim to be representative, the persons surveyed—100 interview respondents per country—were nevertheless selected according to a previously determined quota (e.g. socio-demographic characteristics and the size of their place of residence). Although a relatively broad cross section of the population was achieved, the proportion of students across all countries was high, especially in the German interview sample. Respondents from the public sector form the second largest group in the four countries examined. The majority of those interviewed were aged between 15 and 24, meaning that there is a higher proportion of younger people across all countries. Of the 400 respondents overall, 51 percent were female and 49 percent male, with a similar distribution of men and women across all countries. In terms of the size of their community or town, a range of respondents emerges, ranging from people coming from a community of fewer than 5,000 inhabitants up to a city size of over 500,000 inhabitants. The majority of those interviewed come from urban regions around Tampere (Finland), Erfurt (Germany), Udine (Italy) and Madrid (Spain).

development from a medium formerly used primarily in professional communication, towards a relationship medium. Meanwhile, in a way not dissimilar to the fixed-line phone, the main groups of people spoken to in mobile phone communication are partners and family members, as well as good friends and relatives: “In this sense mobile phones are essentially personal devices sustaining personal lives and commitment, holding those together that have already committed to relatively steady relationships” (Harper 2003: 194). The data obtained by us would seem to back this assessment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Regularity of communication with partners via mobile phone (n=400).



Alongside communication with partners, the mobile phone also operates as a typical family medium, although there are significant country-specific differences. In Italy, in particular, the mobile phone seems to be used most frequently to maintain communication with family members.

Using a mobile phone to communicate private matters in the public domain may not be advisable for a variety of reasons. Organizing proximity and distance between the communication partners on the one hand, and the third parties present on the other, represents a significant challenge in this respect. Managing proximity and distance in such a way firstly depends on the specific spatial and temporal characteristics of the communication situation (e.g. on the spatial distance to others, the size and spatial arrangement of the location, and also the noise level of both the conversation and its environment). Proximity and distance are also closely connected with the existence of specifically active social and communicative rules—for instance in relation to the question of whether using a medium or even a face-to-face chat with

others is deemed acceptable. Of particular significance in this context is the degree to which using a mobile phone defaults on the commitment required in certain social situations (see Burkart 2000: 219). Such situational circumstances may be distinguished by the degree of commitment they require, in as much as these can be dominant or subordinate commitment requirements. Similarly, it can be assumed that there are locations where the use of a mobile phone is perceived to be more or less of a nuisance; this would then depend on how strongly its use is perceived by the third parties present to be an infraction of a mutually expected commitment. Table 1 shows situations where the use of a mobile phone is perceived to be a particular nuisance.

Table 1: Situations where the mobile phone is perceived to be a “particular nuisance” (n=400).

In the cinema, theatre or museum	92.0 %
At official events (e.g. a lecture)	91.5 %
In churches	89.6 %
In waiting rooms (e.g. at the doctor’s)	70.8 %
In restaurants	57.5 %
At social events (e.g. a party)	47.5 %
At work	41.8 %
In public transport (e.g. bus or train)	37.5 %
In bars or cafés	34.4 %
At sports events	29.5 %
In other people’s houses	27.1 %
In shops	25.0 %
In one’s own home	18.3 %
In waiting areas (e.g. railway stations)	14.0 %
In the street	8.1 %
In public parks	7.0 %
In pedestrianized areas	6.0 %

Whilst the context of this chapter does not allow us to go into more detail about the situations listed, significant culturally-specific differences are apparent in terms of the assessment of mobile phone use in different locations. This in turn may suggest that the respective situations are embedded within the overall framework of a “situational balance”—the handling of which differs from culture to culture, and which may only be understood against that particular background.

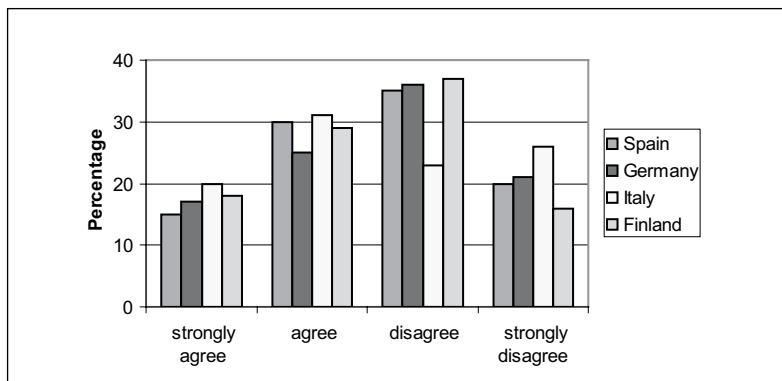
With a view at least to the first four types of situation listed in Table 1, the data obtained by us was said to be “typical” for the countries studied by the participants on the expert panel. However, for the other locations and situations this was not the case. Santiago Lorente, Virpi Oksman and Leopoldina Fortunati all found the relevant data to

be quite untypical for their countries surveyed and suggested that in Spain, Italy and Finland the use of the mobile phone in the context of the situations listed above causes much less of a nuisance than indicated by the results shown in Table 1. This particularly seems to be the case for the workplace, bars, pubs and restaurants, as well as for public parks and pedestrianized areas.

When considering the extent to which mobile phone use is perceived to create a nuisance in different situations, Leopoldina Fortunati pointed to the importance of the relative spread of mobile phones across a country. In this context Fortunati was able to show, on the basis of a questionnaire study conducted in 1996 across Italy, Germany, France, Great Britain and Spain ($n=6609$), that the mobile phone is primarily perceived to be a nuisance in those countries where mobile phones are very widespread—a connection which may be demonstrated by Italy in particular, but also by Britain (see Fortunati 1998). Whilst Fortunati's results point to Germany as a country where the public showing-off of private matters via mobile phones is viewed with the most scepticism, she did state, in view of the data obtained by us, "that the percentages relating to the second and third sets of situations are too high for Italy and probably also for Germany".

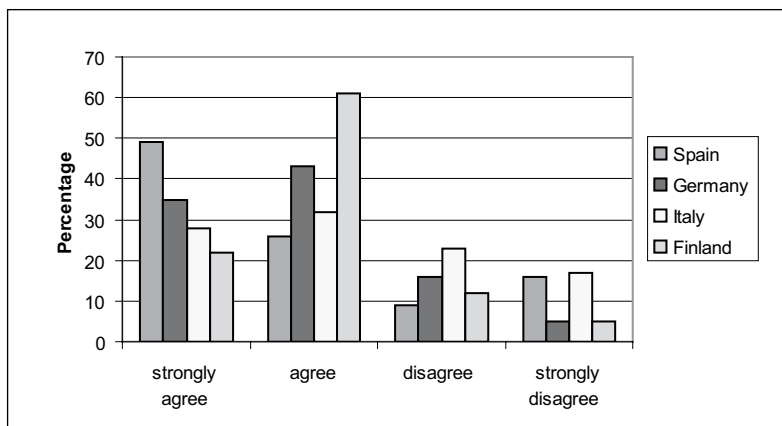
The framework of mobile communication may be characterized by the fact that the presence of third parties represents an integral part of the communicative situation rather than a marginal phenomenon. As for the reaction of the respondents from the countries we examined, the following facts emerge. Almost half of those questioned feel quite uncomfortable when strangers are present during a mobile phone conversation. Just under a third try to avoid such situations, almost one in five turn off their mobile completely, and as many as 40 percent actually find it embarrassing when the mobile rings in situations where others are present. In media communication processes, conversation partners often block out the presence of third parties, as well as the very fact that a medium is being used (see Gergen 2002). However, in the case of mobile phone use this seems to be different. Here, people are certainly conscious of using a medium in the presence of what represents a latent, if not actual, audience. In this respect, 60 percent of those interviewed categorically reject the statement "When I am talking on my mobile, I sometimes forget that strangers are present". Only just under six percent definitely endorse this statement. What is surprising here, however, is that despite the fact that mobile phone use in public spaces—in Italy in particular—has by now become a widespread phenomenon, it was notably Italian respondents who agreed with the statement "I feel uncomfortable making a call on my mobile phone if strangers are around me". This is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Respondents to the statement 'I feel uncomfortable making a call on my mobile phone if strangers are around me' (n=400).



Similarly it is not possible to deduce from the responses received whether people actually lower their voices in the presence of others when using their mobile phone (see Figure 3). Along with Spanish respondents, Italian participants in particular disagreed with the statement "When I make calls with my mobile phone in the presence of strangers I speak quietly or turn away from others."

Figure 3: Respondents to the statement "when I make calls with my mobile phone in the presence of strangers I speak quietly or turn away from others" (n=400).



These results surprised Leopoldina Fortunati as well as Santiago Lorente, who commented on the above diagram: "My feeling is that these results are far too high for Spain [...], as talking on the mobile in

the presence of others in Spain is becoming much like bearing an umbrella or simply talking in public with others [...].” As for the sound levels of mobile phone conversations in public, Santiago Lorente pointed to the fact that such behaviour patterns might, alongside elements that could be culturally determined, correlate most closely with the standard of education and received ideas of politeness: “More educated people usually happen to be the more polite and hence speak quietly or turn away from others.” At the same time Lorente added that the opposite is also true: “In any case, it is true that Southern Europeans (e.g. Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish) tend to speak more loudly in public than their Northern European counterparts.” This assessment was confirmed by Virpi Oksman from the behaviour patterns observed by her in Finland. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that mobile phone use in various public situations is indeed perceived to be a nuisance. In addition, merely occupying too much “sound space” (Goffman 1971b: 71)—whether a phone conversation conducted in a particularly loud voice, or a ringtone with an overly loud setting—can become a nuisance. Many people even get annoyed just witnessing people fiddling with their mobile phone if this appears to take too much of that person’s attention away from the particular situation.

A further aspect of private mobile phone conversations in public being perceived to be a nuisance stems from the fact that others may only hear one side of the telephone dialogue (see Ling 2002). However, in contrast to this assumption our study showed that this is not necessarily the case. Only just under eight percent of all respondents found it particularly annoying that they were only able to hear “one side” of the conversation. This percentage was slightly higher for Italian respondents (13 percent). The fact that people learn things about mobile phone users which they have no business knowing is deemed to be significantly more of a nuisance.

Even though ideas about appropriate behaviour in public vary from country to country, there are definite pointers to the fact that, regardless of their respective cultural background, people do have a desire for a private sphere in public space to be respected by others. The participants on our expert panel agreed with this, even though both Santiago Lorente and Leopoldina Fortunati expressed their reservations about the results detailed above. According to them, the oft-discussed phenomenon that you get to hear things about other people that you have no real business knowing would not cause any great irritation in either Spain or Italy. Therefore, in their opinion, the relatively large percentage of respondents who agreed with the above-mentioned statement is significantly too high. In contrast, Virpi Oksman was able to explain the high percentage in Finland (greater than 40 percent) by the fact that Finns feel a strong need for a private sphere respected by others—a phenomenon illustrated, amongst other things, by the fact

that up to a few years ago public phone boxes in Finland used to be constructed in such a way “that no outsiders were able to hear anything about the private phone conversations at all...”. Oksman qualifies this comment by adding that today Finns use the mobile phone to discuss all sorts of topics in public.

Summary

The mobile phone provides another reason to think about the degree to which the boundaries of public and private communication are shifting through the process of increasing mediatization of everyday communication. In particular it shows that the boundaries as such have never been static anyway, and that they consistently demonstrate historical as well as cultural differences. Whilst the comparison of cultures pursued here has been able to yield fruitful glimpses into the form of public and private communication spaces, it should be pointed out that such comparisons are always subject to the risk of cultural stereotyping.

Our study is less concerned with highlighting cultural differences—rather it seeks similarities in mobile phone use in the dynamic field between public and private communication. Nevertheless, utmost caution is advised with their interpretation, as evidenced by results from a whole generation of ethnologically oriented research. Comparative analyses of cultures always reveal that a whole range of the behavioural patterns observed in various cultures cannot be explained by the existence of cultural differences, but rather by socio-economic factors unrelated to culture. However, culture cannot be discounted completely because that which may appear similar on the surface may be anchored in different, deep-rooted cultural structures.

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