

## Chapter 8: Media on the move:

### personalised media and the transformation of publicness<sup>1</sup>

The gameboy, the discman, the mobile phone, the PDA, the MP3 player - since the 1980s portable, personalised and interactive media have signalled a transformation in relations between people and media. This has been from stability to mobility, from a situation in which the use of media devices was restricted to a location and to a time, to a situation in which media objects may accompany individual users across shifting settings and times of the day.<sup>2</sup> Mobile media potentially link individual users to any other point of digital communication, everywhere, at any time, through various forms of interactive media practices. This transformation equally signals a reorientation of peoples' appropriation of mediated time and space as they develop more personalised interactive forms of communication such as sms (short messaging services), mms (multimedia messaging service that combine text, audio, still and live images), chat and gameworld interaction. The latest generation of mobiles possesses both communication and computing capabilities (email, Internet access, GPS), a combination which is dramatically changing media culture in countries such as Japan and Hong Kong.

Thus, the increased individualisation and mobility of contemporary media culture invites conceptual reconsideration of the time, spaces and social relations within which media practices develop and become institutionalised. And the technological fusion of computing and mediated communication invites similar reconsideration of the interactive forms and communicative functions that mobile devices help facilitate, hamper and contest. Since these concepts have been developed within media studies in relation to mass media and their respective institutions, it is rewarding to take these forms as our conceptual points of departure. Crucial elements here are the relations between public and private spaces, the formation of audiences and publics, and the ways in which both of these sets of relations are implicated in various forms of mediated textual practices.

How do people lay claim to public and private spaces when using mobile media technologies? Do the nearly ubiquitous presence of mobiles in many countries help weaken chronological time or, conversely, reinforce it? Do the portable and personalised media serve to challenge notions of media audiences, as these are traditionally constituted through the uses of newspapers and film, radio and television? Can we speak of mobile publics? What communicative forms and functions are enhanced through interactive, mobile media, and how do these relate

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Like most other portable and interactive media technologies, mobile phones in general and sms in particular were first widely taken up by young people and older children in post-industrialised societies where mobile phones are both a symptom of and solution to the demands made on spatial flexibility, temporal coordination and personal identity performance. Since these groups are pivotal to the socio-cultural transformations of the relations between audiences and media mentioned above, they constitute the focus of my empirical examples.

Moreover, my focus is on European contexts of appropriation and use. While mobiles are adopted in all post-industrialised societies, there are still marked differences in the technologies applied, the institutional frameworks of distribution and the socio-cultural contexts of use. In technological terms, Japan leads the way with its wide dissemination of 3G mobile handsets that allow email communication and access to the Internet with a range of websites, as well as integration of text, sound and image, in addition to ordinary call functions.<sup>3</sup> Europe is dominated by the so-called 2.5G system that allows the data connection to be 'always on' and has swifter data transmission than the 2G system that is the norm in North America. In terms of take-up, Europe leads the way with 73 mobile phone subscribers per 100 inhabitants in 2001; followed by Japan (59 per 100) and the USA (46 per 100). With 278 million mobile subscribers in the EU by 2001 (an 18% increase since 2000), they outnumber landlines by 72 million (Lumio & Sinigaglia, 2003, p. 4). Notably in Europe, the tremendous popularity of short text-messaging has given unsuspected revenues to content providers and operators - in 2001, for example, two billion messages were sent in Denmark, with a population of 5.2 million, against 2.4 billion messages sent in the USA, which has a population of 280 million (Cancel, 2003). Furthermore, ring-tones and logos account for 39% of the total value of the European mobile market (Impe, 2003). For obvious reasons, the

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to prevalent genres within the traditional mass media? These are the main questions that I will attempt to answer in this chapter.

My empirical focus is on mobile phones, which on a global scale are the most widely used of the mobile media. They are also useful objects of study if we want to consider the complexities of contemporary media culture, which is increasingly characterised by technological convergence, individualised interactivity and mobility. Mobiles are at once stand-alone technologies and part of an interlaced media ensemble: phone numbers used for downloading ring-tones and logos are found in magazines; pictures from mobiles are put on the Internet; sms is applied by TV broadcasters in their invocation of audiences. Mms icons draw on brands and star images known from other media. The combination of communication and computing in the most advanced devices lead people in the industry to seek for new names such as wireless devices, handsets and handhelds to cover the diversity of services and functions. I shall retain the term mobile phones since it is the common term used in most countries and signals a key function of use.

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### Public discourses

While mobile phones and other portable media technologies have received little systematic scholarly attention in comparison with the personal computer and the Internet, mobiles have not been short of public and commercial attention. Since their inception, mobile phones have been visible to the public eye and ear. When still-pricy devices in the 1980s and early 1990s, they were flaunted by well-off, young adult males as status symbols and discursively humoured by public wit. For example, in Swedish a mobile phone was a *yuppie nalle* (yuppie teddy), in German it became a *handy* and in Danish a *mobilos* (signalling low-status Spanish). From early on, mobile phone conversations on private matters conducted in (semi-) public spaces, such as trains, restaurants and shops, were objects of public discussion and at times self-admonished regulation (Ling, 1997). The often self-conscious positioning by the early adopters as trendsetters only added to the intensity of the debate.

The wide adoption of mobile phones through the 1990s, not least by the younger generation, and the concomitant domestication of the technology has been accompanied by new public discourses. Foremost among these is a discourse of risk, which comes in several forms. One is the perceived health risk of the devices, with cancer as a prime suspect, a suspicion that is being reinforced with the erection of new 3G masts in many European countries. In addition, the health discourse has intermittently focused on the physical damage to thumbs caused by excessive short-text messaging.

Another risk discourse focuses on the material aspects of theft and exorbitant phone bills. Downloading and sending icons and pictures can be quite costly and the expense is not stated up front. Organisations and societies representing consumers and children have voiced concern about industry responsibilities in terms of underage users, responsibilities that are particularly difficult to deal with, as content providers differ from operators. In Japan, the risk of sexual abuse has been very prominent for some years (Kioka 2003, Takeyama 2003), and this discourse is entering Europe along with the introduction of 3G handsets. Less tangible, but equally pervasive in the risk discourses, is the alleged danger text-messaging poses to the print literacy of the young 'thumb tribes'. With its 160 characters, it invites unorthodox forms of spelling that are clearly at odds with the proficiencies taught at school and hence judged deficient by educational standards.

While public discourses lay claim to negative effects of mobile phones, the commercial discourse through the 1990s has been concerned with promoting more optimistic views. When the technology was still a novelty, its safety aspects were stressed: if you need help, a mobile at hand means it is only a call away. Parents could keep track of the whereabouts of their teenage children at night and monitor

daily coordination of family life. Today, when the technology has become a taken-for-granted tool in many parts of the world, the discourse of connectivity and creativity, flexibility and fun has pre-eminence, as is seen on operators' and content providers' homepages. For instance, "bringing dreams to life" (DoCoMo), "Mobile moments - mobile lives" (Ericsson), "Motorola - intelligence everywhere" (Motorola), "Nokia - connecting people" (Nokia).

A primarily negative public discourse versus a primarily positive commercial discourse mirrors a predominant pattern when new media technologies are introduced (Jensen, 1990; Drotner, 1999). The new gadgets become simple seismographs of complex socio-cultural problematics and they offer welcome projection screens for scenarios of the future. Since the younger generation is among the early adopters, these dichotomies play into established discourses on childhood; discourses that since the 18th century have been characterised by an opposition between protection and autonomy (Gillis, 1974; James et al. 1998; Qvortrup 2000). The more personalised and portable media technologies such as the mobile phone serve to radicalise these well-known positions, since the phones are associated with individual ownership and personal priority of use, and since their handiness make them inconspicuous yet effective means of social coordination and interaction beyond the confines of the home and the control of adults.

### The discursive hinterland

Still, the public and commercial discourses on mobile phones are not only about the material objects of communication. Crucially, they centre on the substance and form of communication itself and the contexts of its use. Private conversations in what is considered public spaces like streets, shopping malls and markets; public performances (such as voting for a candidate in *Big Brother*) conducted in the privacy of the home; collective short text-messaging as part of community campaigns - these are all examples of ways in which the mediated interactions through mobile phones serve to question received notions of what is considered public and private space, what it takes to be part of an audience versus part of a public, what is considered intimate talk and public speech.

These notions are rooted in the idealist Enlightenment tradition that Jürgen Habermas takes as his historical point of departure and in the normative ideal in his influential theorising on mediated communication in modernity (Habermas 1962/1989). According to this ideal, the public sphere is a partly mediated sphere of rational communication and social regulation. Here, publics form and are sustained through their communicative practices that aim at reaching consensual action and intervention. Matters from the private sphere of home and work can be debated as long as the debate is kept on a general level. These private matters concern domestic issues of the home, which Habermas terms the intimate sphere,

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In many Western societies, this ideal has had what may be termed a 'reality effect' in modernity. It has constituted the basis of communicative practices, institutional locations and legal regulations, just as its respective spheres have operated as formative bases of audiences and publics.<sup>4</sup> As is evident, the concept of public denotes a physical or virtual location (public place or space), an aspect of society (the public sphere) and a group of people (the public) that knowingly perform particular social functions with particular social aims. These variations of the concept are often conflated in popular as well as scholarly discourses with decisive contradictions as a result (see Livingstone's introduction to the present volume). Defined as a group of people, a public is perceived as a narrower term than an audience, since it only operates within or in relation to the public sphere, conducts itself through abstract debate, and aims at reaching collective and consensual social action. Audiences are constituted through their mediated meaning-making processes, that can be individual as well as collective, and that can take place in the privacy of the home or on the job, as well as in public spaces. Both the concept of audience and public are premised on the notion of spatial separations of social life, separations that in a symbolic, and often very literal, sense are tied to specific locations. The public sphere, thus, only exists as a meeting ground because public and private domains of life are segregated.

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The Habermasian concept of the public sphere would suggest that popular discourses on the introduction of mobile phones centrally concern the challenges mobile communication poses to received notions of what constitutes 'proper' communicative issues in different areas of society, just as the discussions lay claim to shifting boundaries between audiences and publics. When the central communicative devices through which publics are constituted and maintained can no longer be relegated to particular physical or imagined settings, when communicators themselves are on the move, then the received notions of media and mediators are played out in new ways and our analytical concepts are called into question.

In seeking to understand these reconfigurations, we may draw on the definition of the public sphere put forward by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995; see also Baecker 1996). According to this definition, the public sphere is a continuous social process, mainly performed through the media, whose central function is to offer a reflexive perspective on the system. Hence, it signals a reduction in the complexity of modern society for its members, a signal that serves to ease individual conduct and social continuity. Luhmann, unlike Habermas, has no normative ideal of reaching consensus or facilitating joint social action. Rather, his systems theory harbours a sceptical positivism whose main objective is a continuation of the system, irrespective of its character.

One need not buy into Luhmann's positivist epistemology in order to appreciate some of his insights. That the media serve to reduce social complexity by simplifying, coordinating and framing entertainment and information is well known from audience studies, rituals and genre theory. Watching the daily soap episode or reading the newspaper serves as temporal demarcations in the flow of daily life and as symbolic reminders for audiences of their social belonging (for example, Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Couldry, 2003). Likewise, genres may be seen as recognisable matrices of interpretation, as results of tacit contracts between producers and audiences to get something understandable yet interesting (Neal, 1980).

In the case of mobile phones, we may further contextualise their social ramifications by drawing on recent theories on modernity and on individualisation. Contemporary societies have variously been defined as, for example, information societies, learning societies, knowledge societies and network societies (Masuda, 1980; Husén, 1986, Stehr, 1994, Castells, 1996/1998). Irrespective of scientific traditions, these definitions focus on the constitutive role played by media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in all areas of modernity. The complexity and differentiation of most societies and their increasing interconnectedness necessitate flexible coordination of actions - and hence continuous communication. A majority of this social communication is mediated, as we know.

The enormous increase in the use of mobile technologies is premised upon such social formations, just as these technologies serve to further the growth of social complexity. Mobile phone communication allows, and demands, people to be always available; it facilitates ad-hoc communication and co-ordination as part of the flow of daily activities; and it allows for readjustments to and comments on social action. All this seems to reduce the complexity of social organisation. But at the same time, mobile communication serves to widen people's range of possible contacts, and do so at all times and in all places, a process that in itself tends to increase rather than reduce complexity (Rasmussen, 2000).

In modernity, the handling of complexity is increasingly an individual affair. Individualisation may be defined as a socio-cultural process whereby social interdependence is played out as individual transactions, a paradox that is often lost in popular discussions on the 'me generation' and similar normative discourses (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). What Anthony Giddens calls 'the reflexive monitoring of daily life' (Giddens, 1991) is one of the main results of individualisation in modernity, and much of this monitoring is mediated. The flexibility, portability and communicative ease of mobile phones make them prime means of handling this individualised monitoring in modernity. Late childhood and youth in many ways condense the claims made to individualisation, since identity work is at the fore in all areas of life - school, family, peers and also, for a good many,

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work. Hence, it is no wonder that the younger generation constitutes the early adopters of mobile communication in most parts of the world.

### Permeable spaces

The portability of the mobile phone is its crucial feature. This means the spatial reconfigurations of mediated communication are at the core of its social functions. Landlines connect places with places, and so when people call a fixed phone, they call a particular place - other people (or devices like answering machines) in that place may stand in for the recipient of the call (Geser, 2002). Mobile phones make direct connections between individuals or, in the advanced versions, between individuals and satellites or Internet nodes (and then on to one or many recipients). They can go almost anywhere their users go; they traverse spatial boundaries and so they serve to diminish the concreteness of place in favour of the concreteness of the communicators. This, of course, is why a standard remark of a mobile conversation is about location: 'Where are you?' or 'I am now on the bus'. Unlike landline calls, mobile communication does not assume place; it has to be confirmed, legitimated, and explained - which again requires more text, talk or visual demonstration.

The portability of mobiles serves to make spatial boundaries more permeable and to increase the importance put on the communicative connectivity over communicative context. Mobile communication foregrounds a conception of space, less as physically bounded entities or locales, and more as socially shifting processes defined by communicative practices and their relevance. To be part of a mobile network of callers or text-messagers is highlighted more by users than their actual or virtual location. A television viewer or a radio listener may be conscious of the existence of other viewers or listeners; indeed, this potential self-consciousness is arguably constitutive to the definition of an audience in the sense of an interpretive community predicated on its spatial distribution (Fish, 1979).

Conversely, mobile audiencing is much more focused upon connectivity itself than upon its spatial context. Particularly with the younger generation, mobile interaction will often be a social affair including several people at either end and so there will be interplay between the physical and the virtual audience. A clear example of this interplay is children riding on a school bus and making mobile conversations between the front- and back-seat kids. From an adult point of view such conversation is at best a waste of money but, as is evident for any witness to such an incident, for the participants it is precisely this playful connectivity between place and space, between physically and virtually located audiencing, that makes calling relevant and fun - passing the handset around, listening to sniggering on the phone, looking towards the other end of the bus. This interplay is seen most clearly in terms of conversation, while the potentially more collective nature of sms tends to foreground the spatiality of audiencing: sending multi-

messages, knowing that your message may be passed on to a range of people unknown to you.

Mobile, mediated practices constitute communicative spaces that cross the domains of public, semi-public and private locales and their respective normative barriers. In public spaces, the normative clashes resulting from these crossings are less regulated than is the case in semi-public spaces such as restaurants and classrooms (Ling, 1997, 2000; Licoppe & Heurtin, 2002). Overhearing a private conversation in a public space may cause personal curiosity or irritation, but rarely collective reaction. In semi-public spaces such reaction can be, and often is, institutionally guaranteed. In private places such as the home or the job, mobiles supplement landlines, with fewer challenges of spatial boundaries as a result. Here, clashes are primarily caused by the individualised nature of mobile communication, with mobile calls being reserved for personal calls that, moreover, signal 'ultra privacy' to other members of the private household who may want to monitor the degrees of privacy (Drotner, 2001).

### Flexible time

Mobile communication can be synchronous (conversation), asynchronous (sms, mms, email, voicemail) and both (web chat, Internet) - and it can be round-the-clock. These temporal possibilities are more diverse than those found in landline telephony and in mass communication - the latter offering time shifts via the VCR, repetitions of items such as commercials, and simultaneity via live-broadcasts. However, broadcast audiences cannot influence the sequential arrangements of production, and they largely accommodate themselves to media schedules. As audience studies have demonstrated, the routinised flows of radio, television and the press serve to orchestrate audiences' temporal experiences of everyday life rather than the other way round, and they continue to do so to a great extent, despite the means of time-shifting by the VCR (for example, Scannell, 1988; Larsen, 2000). Media use makes abstract, chronological time tangible and anchored in relation to daily routines, and this mediated notion of time is reinforced through textual formats obeying sequential structuring - the weekly gameshow, the daily newspaper, the hourly radio news.

Mobiles facilitate *ad hoc* mediated communication, which is also reciprocal. Social arrangements can be coordinated, modified and changed literally as people go along. Mobile communication, too, operates as an anchoring of chronological time, but not as fixed points of demarcation. It is a provisional handling of time that aligns mobile communication with a sense of temporal ease and fun rather than the fixities and duties of sequential time management - one may always make a new call, send another icon along. Still, this 'ad-hocratism' (Rheingold, 2002) makes time something to be always aware of - as an expanded momentariness during a call, a reflection on past messages sent, short-term planning of whom to reach next. These potential contradictions make the temporal aspects of communication more

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noticeable for mobile users than tends to be the case with broadcast audiences. In that respect, mobile and Internet interactions are similar, the main difference being that mobile communication combines temporal flexibility and fluidity with a set of permeable spatial qualities.

### **Affirmation of social roles**

The most noticeable aspect of mobile phones, and certainly the one drawing most immediate attention, is its impact on social interaction, not least in public and semi-public spaces. In both formal and informal settings, mobile communication adds an extra dimension to interpersonal communicative practices: place-based activities and conversations are interspersed by space-based mobile communication, and this creates an often intricate monitoring of roles, both for speakers and listeners, particularly in the case of mobile conversation (sms is silent and tends to be more unobtrusive).

When mobile talk is undertaken amongst anonymous others, the speaker negotiates a private, virtual role and a public, physically located role, while most listeners find various ways of displaying what Erving Goffman calls 'civil inattention' (Goffman, 1963, p. 85). Unlike calls to particular places via landlines, mobile callers cannot anticipate the situated role of the recipient, and hence virtual role-regulation is often part of the opening of conversation, adding to the role-monitoring between social roles. These processes are particularly evident when there is a marked gap between roles undertaken in the social and virtual spheres - one may think of mobiles ringing during a classical concert or a conference, situations that often cause embarrassment, both on the part of recipients and listeners (Ling, 2001). Naturally, these are also among the situations when mobile users put their device on hold, thus balancing their wish to be online with the demands made by the conventions of social etiquette. Still, explicit, interpersonal regulation is rare in anonymous and non-institutional frameworks, although general rules of conduct may be imposed in institutional settings such as airports and cinemas.

When mobile talk is undertaken among acquaintances, there tends to be a narrower gap between social and virtual roles, more normative consensus on what roles are acceptable and a clearer regulation of normative transgressions (Ling, 2001). This is seen with the mobile phone uses of the younger generation, with which in-group norms abound - down to the style of phone covers and sms acronyms - and which are mostly self-regulated. Since their uses are also of a more collective nature, they add to the complexities of role monitoring: the roles of speaker and listener are often interlaced when phones (and conversational control) change hands and remarks from bystanders become part of the conversation.

With George Herbert Mead, (1934) it may be argued that these complexities orchestrate an oscillation between the psychological positions of 'I', 'me' and 'you'

that is, an oscillation between an internal and an external perspective on communication that opens a space for self-reflexion. From a sociological perspective, we may say that mobile phone uses serve to complicate what Erving Goffman calls the 'face work' necessary in modern social life. Unlike landline conversations, mobiles do not mediate between a known 'backstage' (the location of speakers) and 'frontstage' (the virtual space of conversation) (Goffman, 1971). Rather, they require negotiations of various front-stage performances (Ling, 1997) - roles cannot be assumed, they have to be affirmed. Hence, these negotiations tend to highlight the existence, even the necessity, of roles and facework. Not least with young people, the concepts of Mead and Goffman help illustrate how mobile phone uses both afford and affirm a reflexive self-monitoring that offsets the playful and performative aspects which the uses also incur.

Moreover, these processes take place in social settings characterised by self-regulation rather than institutional regulation of norms. Obviously, this opens the possibility for shifting the power relations of communication from explicit, institutional levels to more fluid, interpersonal levels. Institutions 'will lose much determinative influence of what is 'really going on' on the level of social communication and interaction' (Geser, 2002, p. 32). While this shift may not cause the demise of a publisher or broadcaster, it does serve to complicate the ramifications of audiencing.

### Adaptable audiencing

In terms of social relations, the concept of the audience encompasses the relations between producers and receivers mediated through various textual modes. Thus, mediated interpretive practices are at the core of what constitutes an audience. But these practices are differently contextualised both in institutional and interpersonal terms, and they give rise to different forms of interaction between producers and receivers.

Broadcast producers address their audiences as anonymous entities - broadcasting is, indeed, about the potential reach of anyone but no one in particular (Scannell, 2000). Broadcasters are institutionally located and audiences are positioned as part of physically bounded and stable communities, even when these communities are imagined or interpretive. The intensified audience interactions with broadcasters through email, sms or phone calls serve to highlight the reciprocity of communication between producers and audiences, whose engagement is called upon. However, these forms of interaction are still directed to institutional *locations*, *defining* the issues of interaction, and gatekeeping who gets a call through, an email cited, an icon displayed during a show.

Mobile communication is a stand-alone activity but also institutionally framed by content providers and operators, a fact that any parent paying the phone bills of teenagers will confirm. But the institutional framework is virtually invisible during

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use; speaking or texting seems institutionally unmediated and hence interaction is all. Mobiles are personalised in many ways. Interaction is transient, it is always to be interrupted or continued, and it cannot 'fall back' on institutional continuities of production. It has to be individually confirmed, continued or rejected; and its substance and form can be personally shaped and modified. Unlike broadcast audiences, mobile users are performers investing their energies in more transient media practices whose communicative rules they seem in a position to influence. Does this make them a non-audience?

It certainly makes them a different type of audience than broadcast audiences. If we retain the basic definition given above, that is, that mediated interpretive practices are at the core of what constitutes an audience, then mobile communicators *are* audiences: conversation as well as texting, image production and reception involve contextualised interpretations of sign systems. But broadcast and mobile audiences are positioned very differently in terms of spatio-temporal and institutional relations as we have seen. Spatial permeability, temporal flexibility and institutional invisibility all serve to foreground the procedural nature of signification, so 'audiencing' may be an apt term to denote what is going on in mobile communication. As we shall see below, the interactive nature of mobile communication serves to strengthen a sense of dynamic in these processes.<sup>5</sup> Still, since audiencing centrally concerns interpretive procedures, these processes must be differentiated in relation to the sign systems involved.

Mobile conversations, being personalised, synchronous dialogues, highlight the performative aspects of audiencing.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in communicative terms, if not necessarily in social terms, they display the horizontal positioning of the speakers, unlike the more hierarchical positioning of broadcast audiences *vis-à-vis* the producer. Such audiences may explore para-social interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956) in the privacy of their homes with public newscasters and gameshow hosts positioned within clear, institutional frameworks, and they often know that they are part of an audience.<sup>7</sup> Mobile communicators extend seemingly de-institutionalised discourses of intimacy with close friends or partners into public spaces. This horizontal positioning serves to strengthen communication between equals irrespective of location (peers, family, friends); and so we see that mobile calls will often deepen established bonds, at times to the exclusion of strangers.

According to the Italian ICT researcher Leopoldina Fortunati,

*the possibility of a nomadic intimacy is achieved, but at the same time there is the refusal to discover and directly experience everything that the social space can offer.*

*(Fortunati, quoted in Geser, 2002)*

Fortunati does not expand on the very fact that communication about intimacy may change when conducted in public and hence she fails to address what happens to

audiencing when issues, which have been relegated to the private sphere of broadcast audiences, are taken into public. What 'nomadic intimacy' signals is the contested nature of the boundaries between public and private places, between social and virtual spaces, and between shared and private forms of communication.

As a communicative practice, nomadic intimacy is simultaneously a textual and social process. It may encompass discourses on private matters, and it will often encompass the deportment of the speakers, who may close off their body language or retreat from co-located social interaction, demonstrating 'the importance of maintaining a buffer around them'. This makes several researchers conclude that the extension of private space into public space becomes an encroachment upon that space. The callers 'colonize a part of the public sphere [sic] and reduce it slightly by their unwillingness to participate' (Ling, 2001, p. 16, 23). Still, such conclusions underestimate the socio-cultural varieties of mobile audiencing.

For the conflictual practices in negotiating public and private space are minimised when conversation is a more collective affair, as is often the case with children and young people who routinely interlace social and virtual interactions. As we noted, mobile communication both enables and enforces self-reflexive monitoring of various front-stage performances and this monitoring is intensified with users' oscillation between social and virtual practices. Here, intimate discourses are generated within collective and self-reflexive communicative processes that afford a self-consciousness of audiencing, a possibility of sharing and arguing about private issues, which may attain aspects of public performances, and publicness, as will be discussed below.

Sms and mms allow asynchronous communication with multiple recipients, and these practices facilitate swift communication from one to many to a degree that is impossible with mobile p2p conversation. Such features equally make these sign systems more similar to broadcast audiencing. Each recipient of a text message will know the phone number of the sender, but cannot trace other potential recipients. In social terms, these structures strengthen loose ties within and between networks, that is ties that lie dormant until it becomes relevant to make contact (Grannovetter, 1973). Unlike connections made to place-based audiences, as in broadcasting, or links made to de-localised individuals, as in mobile conversation, texting may link shifting networks of people as long as these have a mobile at hand.

*Thus a new, more fluid culture of social interaction can emerge which is less based on ex-ante agreements, but more on current and ad hoc coordination which allows people to adopt to unpredictable short-term change in circumstances, opportunities, or subjective preferences and moods.*

(Geser, 2002, p. 16)

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Through its network links, sms eases the rapid formation and extension of groups. The ways in which these formations operate in relation to notions of audiences and publics are largely a result of differences in the aims of communication and in people's positioning relative to those aims.

### Portable publics

The proliferation and domestication of mobile communication through the 1990s has been instrumental in changing the conditions of group formation on interpersonal as well as on macro-levels. Gate crashing is now very much a result of potential partygoers having their handsets switched on and being able to locate and follow where the action is. In the sprawling urban centres, young people co-ordinate their daily, and particularly, nightly activities and interests through their mobiles. The devices not only accompany the male street cultures that young men, particularly working class, have traditionally shaped and shown, they also act as transformative agents of these cultures by affording a new sense of publicness: the users are at once in public and a (potential) public, they claim public settings while forming communicative networks on issues and interests that they may relate to other potential publics. While these networks are transient, they are nevertheless dialogic and self-defined, thus opening spaces of performative and playful reflection and deliberation.

Particularly for young women, this new sense of dual publicness seems of significance. Whether warranted or not, many female informants stress that their mobile increases their sense of security in public places, and hence the mobiles serve as enabling tools for young women to not only claim the night, but to claim public places as spaces of personal affinity and autonomy. But does this make them a public, even a potential one, as indicated above? The answer crucially depends on our position in addressing the contested discourses regarding publics, as well as when and where they may be located. As is evident from the above, mobile communication, by cutting across familiar oppositions, facilitates new sets of questions, asking also *how* publics may be formed and transformed.

To the extent that mobile communication advances a sense of belonging to public settings, a sense of being able to 'do' public communicative performances, on private matters, it also serves as an important lever of what social scientists define as civil society (for example, Lister, 1997, Janoski, 1998). The Swedish media researcher Peter Dahlgren, drawing on that tradition, has developed the conceptual dimension of civil society, a development that is particularly helpful in seeking to define the new constellations between audiences and publics brought about by contemporary media culture (Dahlgren, 1995, 2003). From his conceptual perspective, Dahlgren focuses on what he terms 'civic cultures', that is:

*... how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development (...) The media, both the traditional*