

Everyday Sociology Blog

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Communication Evolution: Mobility, Cell Phones, and PDAs



By Sally Raskoff

I heard a woman tell her friends the other day she was “playing iPhone.” Do you play with your phone technology? The ways we use new and old technologies can illustrate not only economic trends but social change as well.

Mobile communication devices have been evolving very quickly since their first appearance.



Pagers – if you remember them – were ubiquitous in the 1980s and 1990s as one of the first mobile communication devices available to the public at large. The problem with pagers was their limited capabilities beyond simple alerts. I do remember paging my teenagers to “come home ASAP” when they were out past the time we had agreed upon. Paging is still with us although it is now called Instant Messaging (IMs) and is much more interactive with two-way paging capabilities.

Clunky, huge, and limited-range cell phones and wired car phones offered more useful forms of mobile communications for those who wanted to speak to people while out of the office or away from home. We had a friend who would drive a few miles to a mountaintop so that his phone would be able to connect to their system.



Wireless cell phones with larger service areas moved more of us into carrying communication devices with us at all times. People were able to work in more places than just the office – or be paged back to the office – as they could converse and do business from anywhere.

Personal Data Assistants (PDAs, e.g., Blackberry) with phone and email capabilities were first available through one’s workplace as employers sought devices to enable more worker productivity and connection. Address books and calculators were added in to the functionality of many phones.

PDAs and phones now not only include email, address lists, and calculators but many other functions, like music, games, cameras, word processing, spreadsheets. They have so many functions that people can now play for

hours with their “toy” since it has many functions previously unavailable or only found on computers or in other separate devices.

Just a few years ago cell phones used to be luxury items for wealthy or technologically oriented people, but now they are becoming standard equipment—even for teenagers and “tweens.” How many people do you know who *don’t* have a cell phone? My eighty-something parents both have cell phones!

There are also many people who no longer have land line phones at home since they rely solely upon their cell phones. Research on mobile communications suggests that seven to nine percent of the U.S. population use only a cell phone and have no land line phone. Since many of these cell-phone-only people are



more likely to be younger than older, this percentage is likely to continue increasing.

Sociologically, one can analyze this phenomenon through many different theories or perspectives.

Capitalism relies upon us always buying the “next best thing” to keep the economy moving thus we would expect new versions to roll out to the marketplace fairly often.

Cell phones allow us to do our work *and* keep in touch with family thus we can get our work done and retain our ties to family and friends. This provides the grease that lubricates the different wheels or institutions of society and supporting the functionality of our interdependence and organic solidarity. However, dysfunctions do occur, as cell phone using drivers do not have their focus on piloting their automobile as much as talking on their phone or sending IMs. Many states have passed laws, not against using cell phones, but against using one’s hands to use a cell phone.

Those who say it would be very hard to give up ... (among those who use each device)			
	2002	2006	2007
Cell phone	38%	43%	51%
Internet	38	38	45
Television	47	44	43
Landline telephone	63	48	40
Email	35	34	37
Blackberry or wireless email device	6	22	36

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Surveys.

What does it mean for our society that we have become so cozy with this type of technology? As the findings from the Pew study on the left show, these forms of mobile communication are more and more popular and it is harder to imagine life without them! I was surprised to see that, for many people, the idea of giving up television was not as hard as the idea of giving up one’s cell phone or use of the Internet.

When looking at who is using these technologies there are some interesting patterns that may surprise you. For example, as you might suspect the patterns by age highlight that more young people use these devices more often.

Here’s one more surprising statistic from the Pew study, “[For] English-speaking Hispanics, the cell phone is an oft-used and multifaceted device – more so than is the case for white or black Americans. ... Spanish-dominant Latinos are found to be less likely to own a cell phone or use the Internet.”

I’ve mentioned a lot of the benefits of using these devices but what about the downside? Are there costs, besides a bit more danger on the road by distracted drivers?

While the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not see health hazards to cell phone users, some disagree. Dr. Ronald Herberman, director of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute, recently advised that people be aware of potential cell phone risks and that children not use these devices at all.

Mobile data and communications activities: by race (Those who have a cell phone or personal data assistant who have <u>ever</u> done one of listed activities)			
	White	Black	Hispanic
Send or receive text messages	53%	66%	73%
Take a picture	56	57	71
Play a game	23	36	35
Send or receive email	17	19	25
Access the internet for news, weather, sports, or other information	18	27	22
Record a video	15	21	30
Play music	13	27	30
Send or receive instant messages	14	26	27
Get a map or directions to another location	12	12	20
Watch video	9	10	17
Percent who have done at least one of these activities	73%	79%	90%
Median number of activities <u>ever</u> done	2	2	3
Number of cases	1,304	158	129

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, December 2007, n=1,704 for those with cell phones or PDAs. Margin of error is +/- 3 points. Survey conducted in English.

The research has just begun on the possible danger of cell phones. Since the technologies have not been in use for that long this will be an ongoing debate until enough time and research have accumulated to show us long-term patterns.

Sociologically, will such a warning have any effect upon our use of these devices considering the depth of meaning they have for us?