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Lecture script without illustrations; the full paper appeared in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.) *Mobile Understanding: The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication*, pp. 239-252. Vienna: Passagen Verlag 2006.

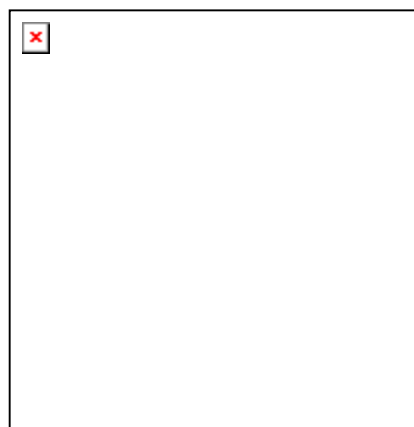## The Meaning of a Mobile Age: Is It Just Cultural Noise?

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At a Glance

The first step in answering the title's question is to begin with a frame of reference for the mobile age. Therefore, I shall outline such a frame. The mainspring of this age is seen in the meaning attached to its enabler, the mobile phone, and in the underlying process of meaning-making. To reveal how this meaning might be understood, I shall suggest a possible way of understanding. This leads to the question of what is being transacted in this process. Hence, I introduce two 'images': a primary which is partly real ('noise') and a secondary which is entirely metaphorical ('spectre'). To conclude, I will suggest an idea on the mobile age being 'just' cultural noise.
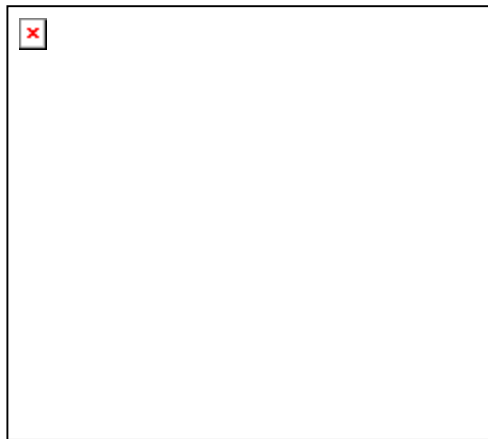
Frame for the Mobile Age

To observe a mobile age a frame of reference is needed. I found one by stepping a few years back in time.

Slide 1: Frame of Reference (1)

In the third century before Common Era Aristotle posited that the heavens consist of spheres, with the 'Primum Mobile', or 'First Moveable', giving motion to all the spheres within it.

Medieval cosmology was centred around the concept of the Ptolemaic universe (approx. 150 CE) which is shown on the first slide. Centremost is the earth, the tenth sphere is the 'Primum Mobile' – revolving and carrying with it all the other spheres. 'Primum Mobile' is figuratively applied to a machine which communicates motion to several others.

Slide 2: Frame of Reference (2)

I introduce an adapted picture to visualise a mobile age (see slide 2). Centremost is the human being (not shown on the slide), embedded in a specific culture. In a contemporary mobile age it is the mobile phone which acts as 'Primum Mobile'. It does so via communication onto the social sphere and people's culture. Mobile technology causes events to happen, changes the way people are acting, thinking, making meaning of such an age.

Meaning of Mobiles

Current social scientific research on mobile phones is mainly centred on 'action', it tries to explore and understand people's action.

Slide 3: Meaning is Understanding (1)

Instead of action my approach explores and integrates underlying 'meaning' (see slide 3) and therefore centres on the precondition of Max Weber's definition of 'social action' (but does not focus on the resulting social action as such).

To reveal how 'meaning' was theoretically organised until now, I had a closer look at two different approaches which expressly take meaning into account: 'domestication analysis', represented by Leslie Haddon, and the theory of 'Apparatgeist' by James Katz and Mark Aakhus.

Domestication analysis explores the consumption of technology, tries to understand people's action regarding the mobile phone, and to some degree focuses on technology as the mainspring behind adoption.

The theory of Apparatgeist explores the spirit of the machine and tries to understand how people fit personal technologies into their lives. 'Perpetual contact' is the inherent 'socio-logic' seen by this approach. It brings meaning-making into play, but only partly.

To some extent, both approaches assume that people are well aware of what they are doing with their mobile phone. But there is evidence that this is only partly true. Finally, because domestication analysis is merely oriented towards 'action', and the value of Apparatgeist has yet to be determined, both seem not well suitable for my endeavour.

The mobile phone, I state, produces a separation between the 'thing' it is and what it represents. Therefore it is important to acknowledge that and how people conjoin a meaning to the 'thing'. To develop meaning-making I use a distinct definition (see slide 4).

> "'Meaning' is the mapping of a state from a micro level of the system onto a possible attractor at the macro level of the system (i.e., context)" (Yair Neuman)
>
> Slide 4: Meaning is Understanding (2)

This process of 'mapping' is what I consider as meaning-making. Still, from a perspective of system theory this definition is deficient because it does not take the social into account. Ignoring this for now, it seems feasible to integrate this definition within my frame of reference.

This step is important since we have to understand the whole system (frame) because the 'person' (in the centre) is linked into larger networks of meaning. But

what is the motivating power to make the mobile phone meaningful? So far it is what is called 'communication' and 'social' within the frame: People use mobiles mainly to communicate and to sustain social bonds.

Still, this concept – based on frame and definition – is incomplete because it does not reveal what in fact is being transacted in the 'mapping' or process of meaning-making. I contend that it is 'images' or representations which are mapped in this process and which may operate below people's everyday level of awareness.

Noise and Spectre

In the following I present two 'images', representations or semantics (i.e., metaphors): 'noise' or 'cultural noise' and 'spectre'.

The mobile phone is not merely a technological artefact, it is a cultural artefact because it relates to people and in between them. In electrical engineering the term artefact stands for 'disturbing signal'. From here I proceed to 'noise', both in a real and a metaphorical meaning.

Two examples of real noise are given: First, when the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) announced its consideration to end the ban on the use of mobile phones during commercial flights, significant opposition arose immediately. The principal objection is 'annoyance'. Second, experimental research gave evidence that mobile phone conversations are felt as being more intrusive than co-present face-to-face conversations where both sides can be heard by bystanders.

One may conclude that the missing part of the conversation – which is specific to mobile phones – produces more 'noise' than the audible part. This is where metaphorical noise or 'cultural noise' comes into play. The origin of the English word 'noise' is the same Old French word which includes meanings from various kinds of sounds to various kinds of disputes.

Slide 5: Noise – The ‚Honeycomb‘

The so-called 'honeycomb' (see slide 5) is a result of a media perception analysis on concerns regarding mobile phones. It shows the broad variety of 'cultural noise' inflicted by mobiles which is reflected in the media.

In my talk I exclude Marx and Engels' haunting spectre and most of the etymology of the term 'spectre'. But I assume that it is appropriate to progress to an even stronger metaphor – because of the mobile phone's ghostly character as a commodity in contemporary life and culture. Because it is important for my train of thought, I like to add that the Middle High German noun 'spenst' carries, among others, the meaning of 'temptation' and in French 'spectre' means 'image' as well.

The mobile phone stands for something else than the mere device: it haunts in people's lives which leads back to 'noise' because spectres try to get attention mainly by producing noise. These metaphors show that I am actually not interested in usage or action but in 'images' and representations, in the meaning of a mobile age, in the noise a spectre like the mobile phone evokes in people's heads and in their culture.

> "Look at children's games and plays! When kids draw people, there is nearly always a mobile phone in them. It's even more central in kids' culture than PCs, close to cars and animals. In the grown-up culture, this presence is more subtle. This culture in any case already waits for its sociologist and historian; I don't grasp what's going on, but I know the impact is huge." (Expert, 2004)
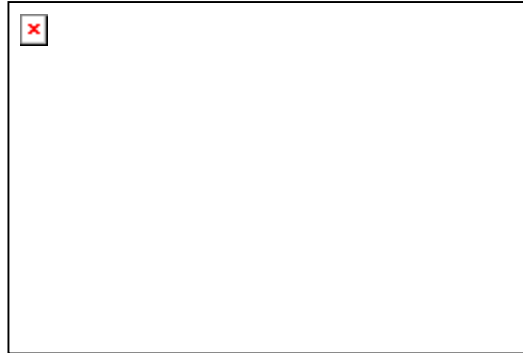>
> Slide 6: Cluelessness?

The quote (in slide 6) is taken from a recent expert survey on social trends and mobile phone usage. If even experts do not seem to have a clue it seems to be appropriate to use strong metaphors like 'cultural noise' and 'spectre' to describe the meaning-making of (and within) a mobile age.

What I have presented in this talk is not a theory but a specific point of view. This approach differs from previous approaches because it does not study the phenomena as matter; it rather develops a kind of semiology for the mobile age. I did so by providing a frame of reference and by using rather uncommon metaphors for a given context.

Is It Just?

But, is the mobile phone, the originator of a mobile age and therefore its current substitute 'just' cultural noise?

Slide 7: Construction of Mobiles

Certainly, the mobile phone is not the first tool, artefact or 'thing' in history that produced some kind of cultural noise or evoked its construction (see slide 7). But yet, this cultural artefact was just too noisy to be simply overheard – at least one reason why we are gathered here at this conference in Budapest.

The successors of the mobile phone, the 'spectres' of a mobile age to come, are going to establish some kind of ambient intelligence, and integrate yet unknown – but most probably tempting – 'things' in a yet unknown world.

The title's 'just' is not a distinction that makes the idea small, in contrary, it makes it rather big.