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Cell Phones, Social Media, and the Problem of Identity

Let me begin this discussion by offering two selections that are relevant to our interest in new technologies and their social and cultural impact. The first is from the abstract of Vincent Miller's "New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture," which appeared in *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media* (2008):

Through a consideration of the new media objects of blogs, social networking profiles, and microblogs, along with their associated practices, I will argue that the social contexts of "individualization" and "network sociality," alongside the technological developments associated with pervasive communication and "connected presence," has led to an online media culture increasingly dominated by phatic communications. That is, communications which have purely social (networking) and not informational or dialogic intents. I conclude with a discussion of the potential nihilistic consequences of such a culture.

The second is from Peter Farb's *Word Play: What Happens When People Talk* (1974) and discusses Bronislaw Malinowski's ideas about phatic communication:

Stereotyped phrases, which nevertheless offer important social benefits, are found in one form or another in speech communities around the world—as the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski pointed out half a century ago. He gave the name "phatic communication" (derived from Greek and Latin words that mean "verbal togetherness") to speech that is used as social cement. And he defined it as "a type of speech in which the ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words." (pp. 24–25)

The question I ask is, If teenagers send each other 100 messages a day, can their messages be seen as anything other than phatic communication?

An Epiphany

During a visit to Japan in 2000, futurologist Howard Rheingold noticed something curious in Tokyo. He described an “epiphany” he had in his book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (2002):

I began to notice people on the streets of Tokyo staring at their mobile phones instead of talking to them. The sight of this behavior, now commonplace in much of the world, triggered a sensation I had experienced a few times before—the instant recognition that technology was going to change my life in ways I can scarcely imagine. (p. xi)

What he was seeing was “texting,” a phenomenon that has grown exponentially and now plays a major role in the everyday activities of people who have cell phones, and is particularly important, for reasons that will be discussed shortly, in the lives of teenagers.



During a trip I made to Japan in 2008, I noticed that on subway trains there, while some people read books and newspapers, large numbers of people were either reading their messages on their cell phones or sending messages. Cell phones enable people to deal with

awkward or uncomfortable situations in which they find themselves when riding in elevators, traveling on subways and trains, or spending time in public places.

Media Use by 8- to 18-Year-Olds

A Kaiser Family Foundation study based on a large survey of media usage by 8- to 18-year-olds in 2009 provides us the following statistics (the chart is my construction of the data):

Time per Day	Activity
4.29 hours	Watching TV
2.31 hours	Music and other audio

1.29 hours	Computer use
1.13 hours	Playing video games
0.38 hours	Reading
0.25 hours	Movies
10.45 hours	Total

But since 8- to 18-year-olds multitask 29% of the time, the total time spent reduces to a total of 7.38 hours per day. The Kaiser Family Foundation survey didn't count cell phone use as experience with media, though many 8- to 18-year-olds use their cell phones to watch television or listen to music. According to the report, they spend an average of 90 minutes a day on cell phones. The conclusion we reach from looking at these statistics is that young people in America lead media-saturated lives.

They are consuming something like 34 gigabytes of data each day from around 5 hours a day of watching screens of one kind or another: computer monitors, cell phone screens, video game player screens, and television screens. Nick Bilton (2009), in an article in the *New York Times*, mentions a study by researchers at the University of California in San Diego that discovered that the average American reads or hears something like 100,000 words a day from the Web, the radio, television, and other media and that consumption of media has increased around 350% in the last 30 years. We read less print media but we do a great deal of reading from screens, of one kind or another, during a typical day, so we're reading more than ever—but not from print media.

From a sociological perspective, we have all kinds of demographic data on users of media in the United States and other countries. We can break the users down along national, racial, gender, socioeconomic, age, and other kinds of classifications. And we know, for example, that the use of media has increased over the past 10 years in most groups. The question we can't answer with any certainty is, What effects does all this media usage have upon us as individuals and upon the societies in which we live?



Figure 10.1 Facebook Growth From 2009 to 2010 (Top Five Countries)

Country	Date	Number on Facebook	Percentage Increase
USA	2009	56.7 million	
USA	2010	114.9 million	101%
UK	2009	17.8 million	
UK	2010	24.3 million	36%
Indonesia	2009	2.3 million	
Indonesia	2010	20.7 million	793%
Turkey	2009	9.7 million	
Turkey	2010	20.5 million	100%
France	2009	8.9 million	
France	2010	17.3 million	93%

* Statistics are from Facebook, compiled by Nick Burcher on <http://www.nickburcher.com>.

Social Media

A considerable amount of the 90 minutes that teens spend using their cell phones is devoted to texting—and now, for a small percentage of teens, a new wrinkle, sexting, in which they send semi-nude and sometimes nude images of themselves to their friends and other people. Of course, once an image is sent to someone by cell phone, it can be forwarded on to other people or even uploaded to YouTube, where millions of people can see it.

The term *social media*, as I understand it, refers to sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube that enable people to send messages, images, and video that can be read or seen by large numbers of people. These social media sites can be accessed on the Internet by computers, tablets, and cell phones. In the passage that we find at the beginning of this chapter, Vincent Miller (2008) hypothesizes that much of the communication we do through social media is “phatic.” These messages, sometimes called “small talk,” are not to communicate information as much as indicating we are present. Phatic communication, as Malinowski pointed out, is a form of “verbal togetherness.” The huge numbers of texted messages we send one another are caused more by the need to maintain our network of friends and consolidate our togetherness with one another than by the desire to convey information.

What media scholars called the mass media used to involve a small number of “senders” (writers, actors, directors, filmmakers, and so on) who made texts of various kinds and transmitted them through traditional media such as print, radio, and television to “receivers,” that is, the potentially large numbers of people who formed the audience. Now, the old sender-receiver (audiences) model has been obliterated since large numbers of people have become the creators of texts of all kinds—whether texted and sexted messages, images, videos, or whatever. Everyone with a digital camera, a cell phone that takes video, or a video camera is now a potential video-maker, and sites like YouTube provide people with the means of broadcasting their works. Marshall McLuhan wrote, “the medium is the message.” Let me play upon his famous dictum and suggest, in an era of social media, “the media are the message makers.”

Members of all age-groups are involved in social media, though the elderly do not participate in them to the extent that younger people and middle-aged people do. On a personal note, when I was in Japan a few years ago I made some short videos on different aspects of Japanese life that I uploaded to YouTube. One of my videos was in a Japanese *manga* (comic books) store. Remarkably, I continually get e-mail messages from manga fans that have seen that video telling me how they would love to be able to visit that store. I have many other videos from Japan on YouTube, but it is only the one of the manga store that gets much attention.

The fact that YouTube has millions of people accessing its videos, that people are sending billions of “tweets” a year, and that Facebook now has 600 million members demands the attention of media and communication scholars. If the social media are that popular, they must be doing something important for all the people who use them.

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Youth and Social Media

I have just suggested that there is a strong relationship between computers, cell phones, and the social media. We might ask ourselves, why do people spend so much time with their computers and cell phones, texting one another and sending texts to social-media sites? One reason, I believe, is that these devices enable people to connect with others and to ameliorate the loneliness and sense of separation many people feel in modern societies.

This is particularly the case with adolescents, who have powerful needs for affiliation, who suffer from anxiety about what they are to become, and who often feel alienated and estranged from their parents, other members of

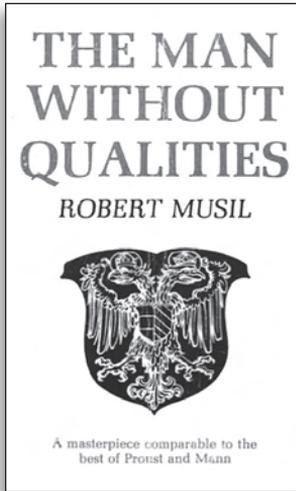
their families, and perhaps society itself. I asked one young woman I saw at my gym, who had both an iPhone and an iPod, about her texting. “I don’t text as much as some of my friends,” she said. “I only send around 40 text messages

a day, mostly to four of my friends.” It would seem that sending text messages allows her to maintain adequate contact with her friends. I can recall seeing articles that found that some young people send and exchange a hundred text messages each day, or around 3,000 messages a month.

What is driving this behavior? For an answer, let us consider the ideas of two writers: one a novelist and one a leading psychoanalytic thinker.

We begin with the novelist.

The novelist Robert Musil (1965) deals with the anxieties of youth in his masterpiece *The Man Without Qualities*. A celebrated passage in the book reads as follows:



By the time they have reached the middle of their life’s journey, few people remember how they have managed to arrive at themselves, at their amusements, their point of view, their wife, character, occupation and successes, but they cannot help feeling that not much is likely to change any more. . . . For in youth life still lies before them as an inexhaustible morning, spread out all round them full of everything and nothing; and yet when noon comes there is all at once something there that may justly claim to be their life now. . . . Something has had its way with them like a fly-paper with a fly; it has caught them fast, here catching a little hair, there hampering their movements, and has gradually enveloped them, until they lie buried under a thick coating that has only the remotest resemblance to their original shape. And then they only dimly remember their youth when there was something like a force of resistance in them—this other force that tugs and whirrs and does not want to linger anywhere, releasing a storm of aimless attempts at flight. Youth’s scorn and its revolt against the established order, youth’s readiness for everything that is heroic, whether it is self-sacrifice or crime, its fiery seriousness and its unsteadiness—all this is nothing but its fluttering attempts to fly. Fundamentally it merely means that nothing of all that a young man undertakes appears to be the result of an unequivocal inner necessity, even if it expresses itself in such a manner as to suggest that everything he happens to dash at is exceedingly urgent and necessary. (pp. 151–152)

Musil is obsessed with the question of identity and the way in which our lives generally tend to “escape” from us and we don’t generally end up living

the kind of lives we think we will when we are young. When we are young we are full of a sense of life's possibilities, Musil writes, and yet, when we are middle-aged, we find that very seldom have we realized those possibilities as we become "stuck" on the fly-paper of life.

According to Erik H. Erikson (1963), adolescents face the matter of dealing with the rapid growth of their bodies and the problem of identity and role confusion they suddenly face. As he explains in his book *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed., Revised and enlarged):

it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs individual young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily overidentify, to the point of apparent complete loss of identity, with the heroes of cliques and crowds. This initiates the stage of "falling in love," which is by no means entirely, or even primarily, a sexual matter—except where the mores demand it. To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one's identity by projecting one's diffused ego image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation. (p. 262)

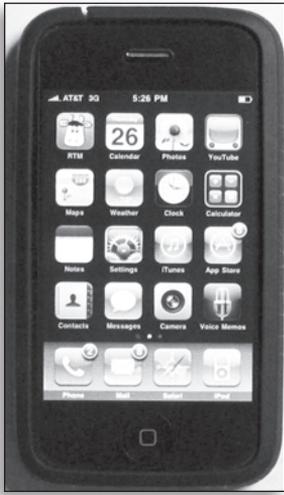
Erikson published his book in 1963, well before the development of cell phones, but his comments about adolescent needs and the quest for identity ring true (to adopt a telephone metaphor) today as well.

Young girls who become fans of Madonna or Lady Gaga or cute guy vampire actors or whomever and young boys who idolize football and other sports stars or other kinds of heroic figures are, Erikson would say, going through a stage in which they are struggling to consolidate their identities and using their heroes as a means toward accomplishing this task.

But why texting rather than talking? One reason is that texting is more private and another reason is that it is less direct. If you talk on your cell phone where there are other people, they sometimes can hear what you are saying to the person you are talking to. In addition, texting enables people to send messages without needing to be concerned about where the recipients of these messages are or what they are doing. When you text a message, you don't face the problem of having to actually conduct a conversation. But the goal of texting is a kind of conversation, and conversation, Erikson has explained, plays a crucial role in the lives of adolescents.

We can say that the social media create artificial or virtual communities of people. Thus, we can get "friends" and "followers" on Facebook and Twitter. The same kind of thing applies to other sites. In addition, there are actual communities of people interested in art, travel, or whatever that one can join on various social media sites. As of now, I have more than 180 "friends" on Facebook—most of whom I don't know and never will meet. My son-in-law has 7,000 Facebook friends; some people have tens of thousands.

There are, in fact, some people on Facebook and other sites who collect as many “friends” as they can get. But are these “friends” really friends? Obviously not. Getting large numbers of “friends” on Facebook is a form of collecting, analogous to people who collect stamps or fountain pens or anything else. And this collecting is driven by psychological needs people have to excel in some way or to have mastery over something.



Sexting is a different matter from texting. There is an element of narcissism in sexting, as young people send images of their bodies, in various stages of undress, to others. There may be an element of sublimation at work, as young women channel their sexual urges into exhibitionism as opposed to actual sexual relations, though research suggests that many young people are having sex now in their early teens. Sexting is a kind of electronic virtual sex. What many people worry about is whether sexting will lead to increased rates of actual sexual activity in young people and a decline in our collective morality and a coarsening of our culture.

The Cell Phone as Sign: A Semiotic Perspective

From a semiotic perspective, the brand and kind of cell phone one purchases offers an opportunity to display one’s socioeconomic status, technological savvy, and connoisseurship. The iPhone unleashed an avalanche of smartphones to compete with it. It isn’t only the functionality of the iPhone that is important. We also have to consider using an iPhone as a fashion statement and as a signifier that the user is a certain kind of person. Many reviews of cell phones take great pains to describe them in terms of their aesthetics—as art objects and exemplars of great product design.

In addition, the number of text messages one receives and sends each day functions as a signifier of one’s “popularity” and status in the circle of one’s friends. Receiving large numbers of text messages from the right persons signifies that a person has lots of friends who are worth “friending.” When cell phone and Internet friends fall out, they then “unfriend” one another.

The iPhone has hundreds of thousands of “apps” (applications), each of which has an icon to identify it. The huge number of apps reflect the power of the iPhone or other smartphones. These apps are generally inexpensive

and sometimes even free. What these apps mean, semiotically speaking, is that the smartphone now has defined itself as a device that can be used to do many thousands of different things. The smartphone has devastated the GPS automobile positioning industry since a number of smartphones now have apps that do this GPS positioning for free. Nobody knows what the next industry to be destroyed by smartphones and apps will be. The Internet, the social media, smartphones, and other gizmos like the iPad are having a profound impact on the “old” print media such as newspapers, magazines, and books, many of which now find themselves in what might be described as a “death spiral.”

In their book *Moving Cultures: Mobile Communication in Everyday Life*, André H. Caron and Leteizia Caronia (2007) point out how cell phones (they prefer to use the term *mobile*) function as status symbols. After discussing a number of advertising campaigns in Canada that equate youthfulness with having cell phones, they write:

The mobile’s new status as an object of value, and thus a means of increasing its user’s social standing, can be seen in other advertising strategies, such as those around Christmas. At this time the mobile becomes a significant gift. Attributing the gift to the techno-object automatically makes it a desirable object, and consequently an object of value. (p. 97)

They point out that many cell phone advertisements portray cell phones as “cool,” an important attitude held in esteem in most adolescent cultures. Having a cell phone, then, becomes a signifier of youth for adolescents—and has an identity-building function, whatever else cell phones may signify for adults, and having the right cell phone confers status, as well.

Marxist Perspectives on Cell Phones

Although many Marxists would find the way in which cell phone companies function in the United States and other capitalist countries objectionable, earning billions for large corporations for providing cell phones and cell phone networks on which to make calls and send text messages, Marxists would also be captivated by the revolutionary potential of the cell phone. During the riots in Iran in 2009, after the presidential elections that were widely regarded as “stolen,” members of the Iranian opposition coordinated their campaigns against the government by using cell phones and social media like Twitter. The antigovernment parades were brutally suppressed by the government, but the ability of the opposition to mobilize itself was due, in large measure, to the power of the cell phone.

Rheingold offers a case study of the Philippines in the chapter “The Power of the Mobile Many” in his book *Smart Mobs* (2002):

On January 20, 2001, President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines became the first head of state to lose power to a smart mob. More than 1 million Manila residents, mobilized and coordinated by waves of text messages, assembled at the site of the 1986 “People Power” peaceful demonstrations that had toppled the Marcos regime. Tens of thousands of Filipinos converged on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, known as “Edsa,” within an hour of the first text message volleys: “Go 2EDSA, Wear black.”

Rheingold discusses other “smart mobs” that show the power of texting by cell phones to assemble large groups of people for political (and other) purposes.

The revolutions in 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya were facilitated by youth using cell phones, Twitter, and Facebook. So the new information and communication technologies (new ICTs) are actually realizing what contemporary Marxists would describe as their revolutionary potential.

One thing that would bother Marxists about cell phones is the way they are often marketed and sold in capitalist countries. In the United States, cell phones are generally sold along with contracts for two years with a service provider, such as AT&T or Verizon, that enable people with cell phones to make calls and send text messages. The number of minutes one can use and the number of text messages one can send and other features provided by the cell phone service providers is a function of the service plan the cell phone owner purchases. In most other countries, people purchase unlocked cell phones, buy SIM cards, and aren’t locked into contracts with cell phone service providers. Cell phone use is generally much less expensive than in the United States.

Another problem Marxists find with cell phones is that they provide yet another screen on which advertisements can be shown. To the extent that advertising helps capitalist societies maintain themselves, cell phones can play an important role in spreading false consciousness and generating the consumer cultures that help neutralize the revolutionary potential of the working classes.

So Marxists have to be ambivalent about the role of cell phones in society and in politics. Now that billions of people have cell phones, they present a dilemma for Marxists. They must figure out how to maximize their revolutionary potential and minimize their capacity to distract the masses from their “true” role as agents of revolution against capitalist oppression.

Conclusions

Cell phones and the social media represent a major transformation in the way societies function. The ubiquity of cell phones and the popularity of the social media are signifiers of a new social order in which anyone and almost everyone

can make their presence known, by sending messages, photos, and videos that potentially can be accessed by a huge number of people. This has had the effect of breaking the monopoly on sending messages in the mass media that was held by traditional media such as radio, television, magazines, and newspapers.

The popularity of cell phones and social media can also be seen as a signifier of the loneliness, alienation, and sense of separation that modern societies generate. Our use of cell phones and social media represents “escape attempts” in which we try to achieve a kind of electronic togetherness or virtual community. What the long-term consequences of the new media on American society and societies everywhere will be, for the new media are now global in nature, is hard to say.

Study Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. What do the statistics about media use and cell phone use suggest about changes in contemporary societies?
2. What are social media? What impact have they had on our everyday lives and on society? Do you accept the hypothesis about cell phones and social media essentially having a “phatic” role? Explain your answer.
3. What role do cell phones play in youth culture? How do they help young people deal with their problems with identity?
4. How do you feel about the Musil quotation on page 151? Is he right about your parents, others you know, and yourself?
5. Although there were no cell phones during Marx’s days, his theories have implications for cell phone use. What points were made about how Marxists might regard cell phones?
6. Do a research project on the use of cell phones, Twitter, and Facebook by revolutionary movements in recent years.

