

The Social Side of Wireless

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Wireless technology has become an empowering technology for applications that have changed, challenged and sometimes confused many of us. As wireless began to be commonplace opinion was divided as to its impact. In 1994, Nicolas Negroponte wrote in *Being Digital*, "... many of the values of a nation state will give way to those of both larger and smaller electronic communities. We will socialize in digital neighborhoods in which physical space will be irrelevant and time will play a different role" In contrast the following year, Clifford Stoll wrote in *Silicon Snake Oil*, "They isolate us from one another and cheapen the meaning of actual experience. They work against literacy and creativity. They will undercut our schools and libraries."

The evolutionary move to wireless has been marked first by miniaturisation in the 1990s and now functionality in the 2000s. Significant parts of our working and social lives are reliant upon wireless. We remain in touch on the move; we have an insatiable appetite for all kinds of information. Our wireless world is a world of anywhere, anytime, anyhow. The meaning of space and time has changed and this in turn has changed the way we behave.

There are currently 4.7 billion mobile connects globally and this has impacted upon our social behaviour. The mobile has transformed the space surrounding us from one of actual public space to one that is a virtual private space which moves with us. We can instantly disengage with the immediate physical space and engage in interactions of our choosing. As you read this article are you in a public space? Look around you – there will be many people in groups who are disengaged as they text and talk using their mobiles. Look at their companions. They will be adopting self defence mechanisms such as drinking or reading as they feel socially isolated from their mobile-using friends. Of the people you can see, is there a difference in behaviour between young people and older people? This is because the young are able to co-exist in physical and virtual social settings. They communally text. They share communications openly. They will even swap mobiles so they can enter into new interactions. Older people tend not to behave like this.

Mobiles allow us to allocate time spent on interactions regardless of our physical location. We compress time spent on engaging in conversation and checking voicemails whilst travelling. We now treat these periods of time as units of resource which frees up quality time for something else. In some sense you are your mobile phone – could you turn yours off for an hour, a day or a week?

A wide range of wireless enabled applications once only available as separate instrument, such as PDAs, MP3 players and mobile phones, has now converged into single instruments such as the new iPhone 3G. The functionality is breathtaking – not only does it have all the existing functions of the separate instruments but there are many more. For example, it can be used to monitor your body signs during a workout and if you lose it you can locate it via satellite link and if it is not retrievable you can wipe the personal contents of the phone remotely. Today the fashion status of these devices is at least as important as the technical specification. The fashion trappings of the wireless world have entered the social psyche.

To sustain us we need water and energy. We treat these utilities in a special way. We expect them to be available on demand. Today our society as a whole and we as individuals need more and more information to sustain our activities. Increasingly we get this information via wireless. Wireless has become the new utility of the information age which we need to treat in the same special way as other utilities. This goes beyond the universal service obligation of reasonable access on an equitable basis regardless of location. Wireless should be the subject of new governance based on universal access and free at the point-of-service. This global utility model must be based on trust rather than economic imperative.

Wireless technology has changed our world. But we must remember we are all different. One solution is no solution because of the diversity of people due to age, culture, circumstance and gender. For example, personal security is one of the most important reasons why people over 30 years of age have a mobile but this is not even a minor reason for young people. Young people also use their mobiles for entertainment and storing personal information but older people rarely use mobiles like this.

Wireless-enabled information availability must be sensitive to the social context of those who receive it. A recent piece of research considered how homeless people inhabit public spaces and suggested how wireless technology can create new opportunities of staying connected via synchronous rather than asynchronous communication thereby sustaining critical social networks to help them stay in touch because invisibility is a major danger for the homeless. Making accessible wireless communication available in these situations is challenging but one that must be overcome.

Social behaviour has and is changing with the advent of wireless technology. We have an obligation regarding technology roll-out to ensure that such changes are not detrimental to any of us and that we will all benefit. If we think of the Wireless Utility then perhaps our approach will be different.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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