Kristóf Nyíri:

The Mobile Phone in 2005: Where Are We Now?

Introducing the Conference "Seeing, Understanding, Learning in the Mobile Age"

This is the fifth international conference within the framework of the COMMU-NICATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY project, a joint interdisciplinary social science project coordinated by T-Mobile Hungary and the Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The project was initiated by T-Mobile Hungary, and launched in January 2001. The aim was to gain a broad, so to speak philosophically informed, perspective on the collective and personal needs that mobile telephony fulfils, and the changes it gives rise to in society and in the life of the individual.

By 2001, the triumphal march of the mobile phone was well underway. The figure for worldwide penetration was 16%, with Western Europe reaching 70% but showing substantial variation between rather low German and very high Scandinavian percentages. The figure for North America was 42%, with the typical American scholar still prone to mistaking the mobile phone for the PDA with a wireless connection, while of course James Katz at Rutgers was already organizing from 1999 on, and publishing in 2002, one of the first, and to date the most influential, volume on mobile telephony and social behaviour.[1] The mobile penetration rate for Hungary was 30% in January 2001, with GPRS already on the horizon, and MMS about to be introduced early the next year.

Today, the penetration figure for Hungary is almost 90%, and worldwide there will be nearly 2 billion mobile phone users by the end of 2005, which means a penetration rate of 31%. Of the almost 700 million mobile phones sold last year, some 250 millions had built-in cameras, while, significantly, only some 80 million digital cameras were purchased. These numbers, impressive enough by themselves, reflect some fundamental conditions and changes, which I will characterize, very briefly, under the following headings: the myth of the digital divide; changing standards of politeness; mobiles becoming the dominant medium; childhood in a new key; the transformation of the social sciences.

The Myth of the Digital Divide

Today there are 8 mobile phones for every 100 people in Africa. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the figure is 2. These figures appear to be low, but in the poor world phones are widely shared. And the economic benefits of the spread of the mobile are double what they are in the rich world. As recent British research suggests,[2] in a typical developing country an increase of 10 mobiles per 100 people boosts GDP growth by 0.6 percent. Mobile telephony narrows, rather than widens, the so-called digital divide. The mobile is significantly less of an unequally distributed resource than the internet is. Also, generally speaking, the digital divide is much easier to overcome than the economic divide which is its cause, and much easier to overcome than the literacy divide ever was. In the end, the digital divide is a myth. Give a kid a keyboard and a screen, and illiteracy becomes a thing of the past. Provide a disadvantaged, barely literate person with access to the internet, and soon she will run a small virtual business enterprise. The thesis of Alexander Gerschenkron's classic paper from the mid-1950s, "Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective", accord-

ing to which underdeveloped countries, in order to catch up, have to directly adopt the most developed technologies without going through the intermediate phases,[3] is fully born out by empirical evidence today. The most advanced contemporary ICT today is mobile telephony, and I am proud to note that the issue of the mobile phone as enhancing economic growth in the developing world was, with the contributions of Jonathan Donner, very much present at our earlier conferences.[4]

Changing Standards of Politeness

In 2001, the mobile phone was still widely regarded as the very epitome of impoliteness. Even owning one was felt as a sign of bad taste. The disparaging Hungarian word for the mobile was *bunkófon*, that is "vulgarian-phone". I have not heard that word for a long time now. The English evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, whose theory of the origins of language – gossiping as social grooming[5] – became, incidentally, one of the most fertile theories informing social science research on mobile communication, gave a talk at our 2002 conference in which he addressed the question of why men, in contrast to women, tended to publicly display their mobiles, and came up with the suggestion that what we have here is sexual advertising[6] – if so, hardly what one would call refined behaviour. But the main problem, of course, was seen in the disturbance of customary communicational patterns: the interruption of a face-to-face conversation by a third party calling, dialogues with absent partners overheard in public places, and indeed one's perpetual accessibility. A flood of learned studies came forth, with some of the most significant ones actually presented at the Budapest conference series,[7] studies of lasting value, theoretical witnesses to a unique transitory stage in the history of social communication. This stage has, I believe, by now passed. Although the management of overlapping social spaces arising as a consequence of public mobile phone usage, as well as the continuous re-ordering of one's schedule necessitated by unremitting availability, constitute real challenges yet to be solved culturally and psychologically, the mobile is, generally, no longer felt to be a source of impoliteness. On the contrary. With the mobile phone having become the dominant communications device, we experience frustration if we cannot reach someone, far or near, by voice or SMS when the need arises. Today, the supremely impolite individual is the one not accessible on the mobile: because he or she does not have one, or does not switch it on, or is careless in checking messages. An asocial creature, disturbing the normal flow of human communication.

Mobiles the Dominant Medium

Combining the option of voice calls with text messaging, MMS, as well as e-mail, and on its way to becoming the natural interface through which to conduct shopping, banking, booking flights, and checking in, the mobile phone is obviously turning into the single unique instrument of mediated communication, mediating not just between people, but also between people and institutions, and indeed between people and the world of inanimate objects. Furthermore, the mobile is today emerging as the dominant medium in the sense of that strange singular in the plural, "media" – both as *mass media* and *new media*. The term "mass media" was coined in the 1920s with the advent of nationwide radio networks, mass-circulation newspapers, and magazines. It designates the whole body of media reaching large numbers of the public via newspapers, movies, radio, television, and most recently the World Wide Web. The World Wide Web also qualifies as a member of the group "new media", meaning that it of-

fers personalized, customized, and grass-roots content. It relies, in a word, on *interactivity*. Clearly, the mobile phone is the new media *par excellence*. It is interactive – indeed, being interactive *and* person-to-person is its primary vocation. And it is, or very soon will be, a mass media: people do indeed yield to the attraction of watching television (and of course of listening to radio, not to speak of reading newspapers) when on the move. I know this is a contested issue, but I believe that the talks to be given tomorrow in the "Mobile Video" section will go a long way towards clarifying some of the debated questions.

Childhood in a New Key

The age group perhaps most deeply affected by the rise of the mobile is that of children. And with the percentage of even very young users becoming ever higher, warning voices, too, have become louder – reaching a shrieking level by the beginning of 2005. The favourite bogy is the image of children not acquiring, or losing, the ability to conduct full-fledged face-to-face conversations, due to their having become so accustomed to mediated communication. As you know, this is patent nonsense. Children handle, pass around, play with, mobiles; the mobile device acts as a centre organizing their face-to-face social space. Of course they also use it to communicate with each other, and that is an entirely felicitous phenomenon. Ubiquitous communication fulfils a deeply human urge, and children especially suffer if deprived of the possibility of keeping in touch. This is an issue the present conference particularly focusses on: it is addressed directly by two talks today in the morning, and by Jane Vincent's talk this afternoon. Also, some ten talks or so analyze the topic of a new learning environment for children (and indeed for us all) emerging as a consequence of access to not just scattered information, but indeed to pertinent knowledge, anytime, anywhere. Recall Dewey's argument – Mike Sharples in his talk will refer to it in detail – that we need schools, artificial educational environments, because the young can no longer move around in the world of adults and thus learn spontaneously.[8] It appears that this state of affairs is today rapidly changing. The medium in which the young play, communicate, and learn, is increasingly identical with the world in which adults communicate, work, do business, and seek entertainment. The mobile is clearly creating an *organic learning environment*.

The Transformation of the Social Sciences

Having become the dominant medium, the mobile phone is today no longer merely a particular, or indeed exotic, topic of the social sciences, as it certainly still was in 2001. Instead, by constituting the very communicational environment of the social scientist, the mobile has actually transformed the social sciences themselves. Hungarian social science was especially well positioned to undergo, and perhaps even to play a role in, this transformation, due to the interest the impact of communication technologies on the organization of people and ideas had in this country in the 1920s and 1930s already: recall the work of József Balogh on silent reading, or the influence paleographer István Hajnal and film theorist Béla Balázs had on McLuhan's Toronto circle.[9] As I wrote in my preface to the volume *Mobile Democracy*, the arrival of McLuhan's ideas in Hungary from the 1960s on amounted, really, to a homecoming. When the COMMUNICATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY project was launched by T-Mobile in 2001, the stage was set for Hungarian social science, and in particular for Hungarian philosophy, to resume large-scale research at the point where Hajnal had finally

broken off in the early 1950s. At the present conference, both my colleague Zsuzsanna Kondor and myself will be exploiting Hajnal in our talks. Futhermore, both Tamás Demeter and myself will be touching on Balogh. By way of conclusion, let me single out from among the talks at this conference some in which the phenomenon that I here label as "the transformation of the social sciences" is particularly conspicuous. I am thinking of the talk by Maurizio Ferraris, pursuing a fascinating new line of philosophical argument in the wake of Derrida; also that of Richard Coyne, bringing in Derrida, Saussure, Wittgenstein, Rousseau, and Kant; that of Brook, referring to Dennett, Dretske, and Putnam; that of Viktor Bedő, a splendid play on Wittgensteinian themes; and that of Jan Derry, employing Gibson, Sellars, and Brandom. To my mind, this conference is a real step forward on the road towards mobile telephony becoming both a mainstream subject of, and a major conceptual environment for, the social sciences.

NOTES

[1] James E. Katz and Mark Aakhus (eds.), *Perpetual Contact: Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[2] Cf. *The Economist*, March 12th 2005, reporting on a new study by Leonard Waverman of the London Business School.

[3] Alexander Gerschenkron, "Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective" (1952), in his *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays*, Cambridge, MA: 1962, p. 9

[4] Cf. Donner's papers "What Mobile Phones Mean to Rwandan Entrepreneurs", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, and "The Mobile Behaviours of Kigali's Microentrepreneurs: Whom They Call... and Why", in Nyíri Kristóf (ed.), *A Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2005.

[5] Cf. Robin I. M. Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

[6] R. I. M. Dunbar, "Are There Cognitive Constraints on an E-World?", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003, pp. 57–69.

[7] Nicola Green, "Community Redefined: Privacy and Accountability", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication*, pp. 43–55; James E. Katz, "A Nation of Ghosts? Choreography of Mobile Communication in Public Spaces", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy*, pp. 21–31; Joachim R. Höflich, "Part of Two Frames: Mobile Communication and the Situational Arrangement of Communicative Behaviour", *ibid.*, 33–51; Ronald E. Rice – James E. Katz, "Mobile Discourtesy: National Survey Results on Episodes of Convergent Public and Private Spheres", *ibid.*, pp. 53–64; Kenneth J. Gergen, "Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds", *ibid.*, pp. 103–114; Raimondo Strassoldo, "The Meaning of Localism in a Global World", in Nyíri Kristóf (ed.), *A Sense of Place*, pp. 43–59; Chantal de Gournay – Zbigniew Smoreda, "Space Bind: The Social Shaping of Communication in Five Urban Areas", *ibid.*, pp. 71–82; Kathleen M. Cumiskey, " 'Can you hear me now?' Paradoxes of Techno-Intimacy Resulting from the Public Use of Mobile Communication Technology", *ibid.*, 151–158; Joachim R. Höflich, "A Certain Sense of Place: Mobile Communication and Local Orientation", *ibid.*, pp. 159–168; Lyn-Yi Chung – Sun Sun Lim, "From Monochronic to Mobilechronic: Temporality in the Era of Mobile Communication", *ibid.*, pp. 267–280.

[8] I have touched on this theme in my papers "Towards a Philosophy of Virtual Education", in Marilyn Deegan – Harold Short (eds.), *DRH 99*, London: King's College, 2000, pp. 107–131, and "Towards a Philosophy of M-Learning", in M. Milrad – U. Hoppe – Kinshuk (eds.), *Wireless and Mobile Technologies in Education*, Los Alamitos, CA: IEEE Computer Society, 2002, pp. 121–124.

[9] See my paper "Netzwerk und Erkenntnismacht", http://www.phil-inst.hu/nyiri/ NKW_nyiri.htm, where I also refer to some earlier papers of mine on the subject: "Wörter und Bilder in der österreichisch-ungarischen Philosophie: Von Palágyi zu Wittgenstein", *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 24/3 (2001); "Österreichisch-ungarische Kommunikationsphilosophien", in B. Boisits – P. Stachel (eds.), *Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit: Zur Frage des Pluralismus in Moderne und Postmoderne*, Wien:

Passagen Verlag, 2000; "From Palágyi to Wittgenstein: Austro-Hungarian Philosophies of Language and Communication", in Nyíri – P. Fleissner (eds.), *Philosophy of Culture and the Politics of Electronic Networking*, vol. 1: *Austria and Hungary: Historical Roots and Present Developments,* Innsbruck–Wien: Studien Verlag / Budapest: Áron Kiadó, 1999; "Mitteleuropa und das Entstehen der Postmoderne", in Richard G. Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner and Anna M. Drabek (eds.), *Mitteleuropa – Idee, Wissenschaft und Kultur im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997 (revised version of "Österreich und das Entstehen der Postmoderne", in Jeff Bernard und János Kelemen [eds.], *Zeichen, Denken, Praxis*, Wien–Budapest: ÖGS/ISSS, 1990.)