

## **Book Review**

**Thumb Culture: The Meaning of Mobile Phones for Society**, Peter Glotz, Stefan Bertschi & Chris Locke (Eds), 2005, Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick & London, 293 pages, US\$39.95 (Paperback) ISBN 3 89942 403 4

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Go anywhere in the world today and you will see people writing messages, listening to music, watching television, taking photographs, studying a language, driving a car – and surprisingly, perhaps, even talking to someone else – all while using their mobile phone. What is the changing signification of a mobile phone? What effects are mobiles having on culture and society? *Thumb Culture*, an edited collection with nineteen chapters, explores the multifaceted sides of these questions, and addresses how mobiles are changing identities and the culture of communal life in an era of globalization and the information society. In answering these questions the book suggests a rather obvious conclusion, namely that mobiles have increased connectivity and access, as well as a restructuring of economic and social relations, especially in the developing world. While on the one hand it offers an intensely optimistic view of mobiles, a number of chapters also focus on the potential for misuse evident in topical issues such as cyberbullying, or more enduring ones, such as security, privacy, fraud and addiction. One of the book's most trumpeted achievements is the inclusion of an interesting survey of experts' views on the implications of mobiles, and this a significant addition that provides greater weight to the findings of the book as a whole.

The book's three sections are framed by an introduction by the editors and a conclusion that incorporates research findings from the international expert survey. The authors are drawn mainly from philosophy, sociology, psychology and communications research, but the style of the book is surprisingly accessible and easy to digest. Readers are told early on that the phrase *thumb culture* was originally coined in Japan, a point that anyone who has visited the country in the last ten years will immediately understand. Interestingly, however, while Japanese society has embraced the mobile like no other, in a significant elision, no chapter examines these developments in close detail. The chapter on Asia by Genevieve Bell focuses mostly on Korea and the potential of China.

Section One, Cultural Identities, has five chapters dealing with a sociological perspective on mobile phone usage; a cultural reading of mobiles in Asia; communication problems; mobiles and teenage life; and two case studies, one on ownership and access in Rwanda, the other on mobile customization and gender in Melbourne. As the title of the first chapter in the section implies, "Is the cell phone undermining the social order?", the book is not afraid of incorporating critical perspective, including Geser's idea that 'mobile phones decelerate or even reverse long-term evolutionary trends of human supra-individual institutions: trends toward stable, depersonalized, formalized, complex and predictable supra-individual institutions' (p. 31). While this is another way of stating that mobiles are renegotiating existing boundaries between private and public spaces, his contribution ends with the rather bizarre assertion that mobiles are 'more suited to lower-class culture than to middle- and higher-class settings' as they are 'much better tolerated in proletarian restaurants than in higher-class dining rooms' (p. 33). Geser's criticisms even suggest that the mobile trend could be reversed, a fact painfully at odds with Doller's contribution later in the same section on the Rwanda case study. On the contrary, Doller argues that there are already more mobile subscribers than those with landlines, and that the continued emergence of China, India, and Africa, will consolidate mobiles as the only phones people have ever used, regardless of socio-

economic class. More sensibly, he describes in detail how mobiles can promote stronger economic as well as social relations.

The six chapters comprising Section Two, Mobile Personalities, deal with emotional attachment; the relationship between private and public communication; the role of interspace in sustaining identity; the mobile phone as a technological artefact; mobiles and unalienated communication; and the mobile's transformation of daily life. Kristoff Nyri's discussion of the mobile's ambivalent relationship with postmodern trends provides one of the most interesting contributions. At the same time as mobiles participate in the trends reinforcing radical decentralization, they also empower individuals through increased connections 'formerly enjoyed by genuine local communities' (p. 169). Nyri approvingly corroborates Anthony Townsend's argument that societies produce technologies that best reflect the socio-cultural conflicts of the era.

Section Three, Industry Perspectives, addresses a range of topics, from customer needs in a mobile era, mobile etiquette, mobile weblogs (moblogs), to considerations of future technology, and 3G phones and beyond. Lara Srivastava's chapter on mobile mania and manners stands out as it addresses the connection between the discourses of technology, society and politics. Her contribution interestingly dovetails with those of a number of others in the same volume, and discusses the impact of mobiles on daily human existence in the shape of social etiquette and spam. In advocating a policy of regulation, she outlines ways to counteract the potential for disinformation and misuse.

*Thumb Culture* concludes with a discussion of the insights gained from the book's international Delphi Report on people, mobiles and society. Among the most prominent findings of its international survey is the use of mobiles by children and teenagers, an increase in regulatory frameworks, and availability at even higher levels. The most negative factors of mobiles are privacy, stress and distraction, as well as the misuse of personal data and the continue blurring of the boundaries between business and leisure. Taken together the book's three sections combine to produce a number of fascinating perspectives on the changing contours of cultural identity, mobile personality, and the mobile phone industry. Rather than being a one-sided advocate of the transformative power of anywhere, anytime communication, then, a number of contributors discuss the ways in which the phone is producing regressive models of communication. Instead of allowing users to contact new people, mobiles consolidate smaller social networks. This is a quite ironic finding, especially given the context of emerging Web 2.0 technologies, and their apparent focus on aiding collaboration and social networking. While the mobile has increased the potential of connectivity around the globe, increased communication has done little, however, to prevent or resolve personal, social or political conflicts. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) can be used to track the whereabouts of your children to relieve anxiety. On the other hand, they might even increase the divorce rate by allowing wives to track the locations of their wayward husbands with greater effectiveness. As the book's honeycomb map of the mobile's facets suggests, it is open to a range of ambiguous positions on the use-misuse scale (p. 262).

The book's overall achievement is its fascinating insight into the changing cultural signification of mobiles. In the 1980s, a mobile was a clunky device used by businessmen and city traders to broker deals. It could only be used for conversations, sometimes unreliably so, due to limited network coverage. They were certainly more mobile than a ring telephone, but couldn't fit in your pocket. In the late nineties and early part of the new century, mobiles became an object of mass appeal, rapidly crossing borders between generations, socio-economic groups, entertainment and education, as well as the industrialized and developing worlds. Now they fit comfortably in a child's pocket, and their

keypads are ideal for the rapid movement of tiny fingers and thumbs. On September 11, 2001, mobiles were simultaneously used by terrorists to bring down a civilian aircraft and the Twin Towers, as well as by the victims in their final messages to loved ones. There are now more mobile phones in Africa than landlines. In China alone, 11.2 billion SMS were sent between February 17 and February 24 2007, the week covering the Chinese New Year holiday. If the marketing campaign is to be believed, the launch of Apple's iPhone – a device that runs OSX and incorporates the features of an iPod and a standard Internet browser – means that this mega-trend in communications has just reached a new phase in its evolution. Nevertheless, the high profile marketing conceals nagging claims that wireless waves could induce cancer, and all the while large networks conceal new antennas behind advertising hoardings. Never before perhaps has a technology been so mobile, pervasive and ubiquitous, all at the same time. In a short period of time the mobile has evolved from a status symbol of businessmen to an everyday device necessary for the social lives of school children. By chronicling these developments, *Thumb Culture* is a significant intervention into a rapidly changing area of research, and one perhaps that we will be able to read about sooner rather than later, on our own mobile phones, anywhere in the world.