

The 'Taken for Granted' Nature of Mobile Phones¹⁾

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This article examines the diffusion of mobile telephony into society and examines how it has made the transition from being simply a useful device, to being an assumed technology. To the degree that this has happened, it approximates Durkheim's notion of social facts. Other technologies, such as automobile transport have similar characteristics.

My sister-in-law, who is a librarian in a small town in western Norway, was staying with us while she attended a book exhibition in Oslo. On a nice Saturday morning she and I took the tram together into the city center. She was on her way to the exhibition and I was enroute to meeting a friend for a cup of coffee. After boarding the tram she started to methodically look through her pockets and her small back pack. As she did this she told me that she had forgotten her mobile phone. She had a loose agreement with a friend to meet at the exhibition and then she had plans to meet yet another friend for dinner. There were no concrete agreements as to time and place, only loose arrangements. All three had assumed that they would call one another as the day progressed to agree on when and where they would meet. Not having a mobile phone put both of these plans into danger since there was no easy way to contact either of the friends and to firm up the plans.

She considered turning back to get her phone but that would have meant a considerable delay given the need to wait for new trams, etc. I offered to lend her my phone but the others' numbers were only recorded on the memory of her own phone and there was no easily reachable directory assistance. I suggested that she could find a phone booth at the exhibition, call to my wife and get the phone numbers etc. Another alternative was to count on the chance that she would meet the one friend at the exhibition. If she could chance onto the first friend, she could borrow her phone. Then my sister-in-law could first call my wife in order to get the number of the second friend and then call her to firm up the dinner date. This was how we left it when we parted.

The episode shows how our reliance on the mobile communication becomes obvious when for one reason or another we are without it. We are often engaged in a web of interactions and expectations that are increasingly based on access to mobile communication. If for one reason or another we are without one, we – and the people with whom we interact – have to quickly think up 'work arounds' for the

situation. There are alternatives (finding one of the diminishing number of phone booths, borrowing a phone from a friend, banking on the chance that you bump into the others, etc.). But these are all more difficult and chancy. The easiest thing is to have the phone so that others can just call to you.

Mobile communication has become taken for granted, that is how it has become something akin to what Durkheim would call a social fact. In developed countries, the majority of people own a mobile phone and in developing countries, they are spreading quickly. The mobile phone is often seen as an individual technology that we have on our person like, for example, jewelry or clothes. As with jewelry and clothes, the style, color and functions of the mobile phone are given careful consideration before purchasing. Further, we are to some degree judged, and we also judge others on the style and vintage of their mobile phones.

Treating the mobile phone as a piece of jewelry or a bit of clothing captures only a part of their effect on society. It is, after all, much more than a piece of 'bling'. The mobile phone connects us to one another. It provides us with individual addressability so that we can call to individuals and not places (Ling & Donner, forthcoming). It helps us to micro-coordinate our daily interactions and to maintain our social relations (Ling & Yttri, 2002).

We use the mobile phone to call others, to coordinate meetings and to send a quick greeting to a friend. We use it to send quick text messages to our buddies wishing them a happy birthday and to iteratively decide at which bar we will meet to uncork the celebration. We use it to make dentist appointments and to tell work colleagues we will be five minutes late because of traffic. We use it to coordinate our individual affairs in the flux of everyday life and we use it to exchange expressive calls and text messages with those in our intimate sphere. In short, we use it for both large and small scale interactions that form the fabric of everyday life.

¹⁾ This is a short excerpt from a forthcoming book provisionally entitled *Taken for grantedness to be published by MIT Press.*

The functions described up to this point are all of service to the individual. At the same time, we are increasingly expected to be available for others via the mobile phone. It is a device from which we can call out to others but it is also a device through which we can be reached. In this way, it is becoming a part of the broader social metabolism. Mobile communication gives us the convenience of an individualized communication device. It is also a part of our common expectations towards one another. That is, Mobile communication is becoming taken for granted.

The important thing is that mobile phones are not only an item consumed by the individual. It is more of a social issue than an issue of individual preference whether we have a mobile phone or not. We can try to assert our individualism by not having one, but it is others that we inconvenience by doing this.

We assume that others will be available whenever we wish to call them and wherever we – and they – may find themselves. The mobile phone is no longer just ‘nice to have’. It is not a device that only affords us individual convenience. As my sister-in-law discovered, we are starting to assume those with whom we wish to interact also have a mobile phone as a part of their everyday kit. When organizing interaction with our friends and family we assume that others are available via their mobile phones. If for some reason they are not, then it becomes our problem. We need to somehow work around the individuals who are not available via mobile communication and use other, perhaps less efficient, forms of communication (Katz in Weiner, 2007).

Mobile communication illustrates aspects of Emil Durkheim’s notion of a social fact (1982) albeit in a modified version. A social fact is something that exists outside the individual but which has a coercive power over him/her and which is, in some ways, obligatory. Durkheim describes money as a social fact and, following Durkheim’s lead, de Saussure asserts that language can also be seen in this light (1985, 45). Durkheim writes that social facts:

“... are imbued with a compelling and coercive power by virtue of which, whether he wishes it or not, they impose themselves upon him ... it asserts itself as soon as I try to resist.” (Durkheim, 1938, 51)

Further he notes:

“They come to each one of us from outside and can sweep us along in spite of ourselves. If perhaps I abandon myself to them I may not be conscious of the pressure that they are exerting upon me, but that pressure makes its presence felt immediately [when] I attempt to struggle against them.” (Durkheim, 1938, 53)

Social facts are those elements in society that go beyond the individual. Thus, the analysis of social facts encourages us to look beyond the effect of a particular artifact on individuals and instead think about it at a broader social level.²⁾

It is clear that ownership (or non-ownership) of a mobile phone is not nearly in the same league as money, language or nationalism. One reading of Durkheim might suggest that a social fact is a *sine qua non* for a human community. Seen in this way, mobile communication is perhaps a vague shadow of the much more fundamental social facts. We can, after all, choose to not have a mobile phone in spite of the fact that it often proves to be a complication both for us and for friends and family who need to coordinate with us.

Obviously, It is much more difficult, and perhaps impossible, to refuse the use of money or language. It is nonetheless interesting to problematize the monolithic nature of social facts.³⁾ It is possible to conceive of various technologies as being, to one degree or another, taken as given and it is also interesting to consider their evolution. This is clearly a rescaling of Durkheim’s notion. It is interesting, nonetheless, since it gives us the notions of how social facts emerge.

The automobile is a good example of a technology that has become rooted in society as an evolving social fact. In the century since the late 1800s the automobile moved from being an odd contraption on the edge of society to being a taken-for-granted factor in everyday life. In the late 1800s none of the major elements of today’s automobile culture were in place. Cars were rickety contrivances. There were rarely cabs for the passengers, they needed constant prodding and maintenance, and they were more often than not seen as the hobby of determined tinkerers or eccentric millionaires. As if to ensure cars’ marginalization, the roads were poor, and there were few gas stations and even fewer repair shops. If you were an early user, it was almost in spite of their usefulness. Society was clearly oriented toward other forms of

2) Indeed Durkheim also considered suicide a social fact that varied according to the religious orientation of a culture (Durkheim, 1951).

3) Going in the direction of making them even more monolithic, Mauss has worked with the concept of the “total social fact” (Levi-Strauss, 1987).

transportation. This had consequences for the way that people organized their lives. Work, shopping, and schooling were often within walking distance. Daily activities did not require the individual to move about to the degree that we often see today. Neither the automobile nor the culture of the automobile had gained the purchase that they have today.

If we fast-forward 100 or 130 years, we see the difference. There are parking lots, paved roads, service stations, and all the standard automobile-related features of life. The car has also spawned strip malls and shopping centers. It is often easier to drive a few hundred yards from one strip mall to another (and belch out the consequent pollution), since walking involves detouring around multilane streets that are more car than pedestrian friendly. In addition, there is a whole sector of society that is oriented toward servicing the automobile and the passengers within. There are not just 'filling' stations but service areas where we can attend to the nutritional needs of both the car and the passengers and where we can also buy music, kitschy art, and reading material.

In addition to having reformed the urban landscape, the automobile has spawned a supporting ideology. There is not only the sense that the automobile is an essential means of transport (Hjorthol, 2000), but that it is a part of our identity that inspires a sense of loyalty qua dependency resulting in bumper-sticker-like statements such as "You can have my new SUV when you peel my cold, dead hands off its leather steering wheel" (Greenhut, 2003).

Finally, in many places there is the taken for granted assumption that others with whom we interact have access to an automobile. When we plan social engagements, set up meetings or when we simply engage in planning the mechanics of everyday life (shopping for food, seeking entertainment, etc.) there

is the supposition that we and those with whom we interact have a car. In many cities if we do not have one, then we need to develop elaborate ways of working around the problem. To the degree that others rely on us being at certain places, our not having a car becomes a problem not only for us, but for them.

Following from the example of the automobile, we can speculate that the mobile telephone will develop its own logic. The story of mobile communication is shorter than that of the automobile or the landline phone. While various forms of mobile radio have been possible since the early 1900s (Farley, 2005), the popular adoption of the cellular-based mobile telephone system is more recent. To draw somewhat more clearly the parallel with the automobile, until recently mobile communication was the province of either the rich or the technically determined. Mobile phone devices were heavy and required inordinate amounts of power to use. They were quirky, and the coverage was spotty. From the mid-1990s, we have seen mobile communication become more commercially accessible and we have also seen the rapid acceptance of the mobile phone in first the developed and now in the developing world.

There is the sense that the mobile phone and other technologies are somehow burrowing into our sense of what it is to be a part of society. They are in the process of emerging as some form of social facts. While not being on the scale of the Durkheimian notion of social facts, technologies such as the automobile, the watch, internet and mobile communication are not just personal artifacts, they are things whose use is difficult to ignore. Indeed, we ignore them at the risk of causing extra work for the people in our intimate sphere. As my sister-in-law discovered, we expose ourselves to social peril if we forget our mobile phone since it is becoming a taken for granted part of daily life.

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