

Our Cell Phones, Ourselves

Christine Rosen

Hell is other people,” Sartre observed, but you need not be a misanthrope or a diminutive French existentialist to have experienced similar feelings during the course of a day. No matter where you live or what you do, in all likelihood you will eventually find yourself participating in that most familiar and exasperating of modern rituals: unwillingly listening to someone else’s cell phone conversation. Like the switchboard operators of times past, we are now all privy to calls being put through, to the details of loved ones contacted, appointments made, arguments aired, and gossip exchanged.

Today, more people have cell phones than fixed telephone lines, both in the United States and internationally. There are more than one billion cell phone users worldwide, and as one wireless industry analyst recently told *Slate*, “some time between 2010 and 2020, everyone who wants and can afford a cell phone will have one.” Americans spend, on average, about seven hours a month talking on their cell phones. Wireless phones have become such an important part of our everyday lives that in July, the country’s major wireless industry organization featured the following “quick poll” on its website: “If you were stranded on a desert island and could have one thing with you, what would it be?” The choices: “Matches/Lighter,” “Food/Water,” “Another Person,” “Wireless Phone.” The World Health Organization has even launched an “International EMF Project” to study the possible health effects of the electromagnetic fields created by wireless technologies.

But if this ubiquitous technology is now a normal part of life, our adjustment to it has not been without consequences. Especially in the United States, where cell phone use still remains low compared to other countries, we are rapidly approaching a tipping point with this technology. How has it changed our behavior, and how might it continue to do so? What new rules ought we to impose on its use? Most importantly, how has the wireless telephone encouraged us to connect individually but disconnect socially, ceding, in the process, much that was civil and civilized about the use of public space?

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Untethered

Connection has long served as a potent sign of power. In the era before cell phones, popular culture served up presidents, tin-pot dictators, and crime bosses who were never far from a prominently placed row of phones, demonstrating their importance at the hub of a vast nexus. Similarly, superheroes always owned special communications devices: Batman had the Batphone, Dick Tracy his wrist-phone, Maxwell Smart his shoe spy phone. (In the Flash comics of the 1940s, the hero simply outraces phone calls as they are made, avoiding altogether the need for special communication devices.) To be able to talk to anyone, at any time, without the mediator of the human messenger and without the messenger's attendant delays, is a thoroughly modern triumph of human engineering.

In 1983, Motorola introduced DynaTAC, now considered the first truly mobile telephone, and by the end of that year, the first commercial cellular phone systems were being used in Chicago and in the Baltimore/Washington, D.C. area. Nokia launched its own mobile phone, the cumbersome Cityman, in 1987. Americans were introduced to the glamour of mobile telephone communication that same year in a scene from the movie *Wall Street*. In it, the ruthless Gordon Gekko (played by Michael Douglas) self-importantly conducts his business on the beach using a large portable phone. These first-generation cell phones were hardly elegant—many people called them “luggables” rather than “portables,” and as one reporter noted in *The Guardian*, “mobiles of that era are often compared to bricks, but this is unfair. Bricks are quite attractive and relatively light.” But they made up in symbolic importance what they lacked in style; only the most powerful and wealthiest people owned them. Indeed, in the 1980s, the only other people besides the elite and medical professionals who had mobile technologies at all (such as pagers) were presumed to be using them for nefarious reasons. Who else but a roving drug dealer or prostitute would need to be accessible at all times?

This changed in the 1990s, when cell phones became cheaper, smaller, and more readily available. The technology spread rapidly, as did the various names given to it: in Japan it is *keitai*, in China it's *sho ji*, Germans call their cell phones *handy*, in France it is *le portable* or *le G*, and in Arabic, *el mobile*, *telephone makhmul*, or *telephone gowal*. In countries where cell phone use is still limited to the elite—such as Bulgaria, where only 2.5 percent of the population can afford a cell phone—its power as a symbol of wealth and prestige remains high. But in the rest of the world, it has become a

technology for the masses. There were approximately 340,000 wireless subscribers in the United States in 1985, according to the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Associate (CTIA); by 1995, that number had increased to more than 33 million, and by 2003, more than 158 million people in the country had gone wireless.

Why do people use cell phones? The most frequently cited reason is convenience, which can cover a rather wide range of behaviors. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* this spring, an executive for a wireless company noted that “in Slovakia, people are using mobile phones to remotely switch on the heat before they return home,” and in Norway, “1.5 million people can confirm their tax returns” using cell phone short text messaging services. Paramedics use camera phones to send ahead to hospitals pictures of the incoming injuries; “in Britain, it is now commonplace for wireless technology to allow companies to remotely access meters or gather diagnostic information.” Construction workers on-site can use cell phones to send pictures to contractors off-site. Combined with the individual use of cell phones—to make appointments, locate a friend, check voicemail messages, or simply to check in at work—cell phones offer people a heretofore unknown level of convenience.

More than ninety percent of cell phone users also report that owning a cell phone makes them feel safer. The CTIA noted that in 2001, nearly 156,000 wireless emergency service calls were made every day—about 108 calls per minute. Technological Good Samaritans place calls to emergency personnel when they see traffic accidents or crimes-in-progress; individuals use their cell phones to call for assistance when a car breaks down or plans go awry. The safety rationale carries a particular poignancy after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. On that day, many men and women used cell phones to speak their final words to family and loved ones. Passengers on hijacked airplanes called wives and husbands; rescue workers on the ground phoned in to report their whereabouts. As land lines in New York and Washington, D.C., became clogged, many of us made or received frantic phone calls on cell phones—to reassure others that we were safe or to make sure that our friends and family were accounted for. Many people who had never considered owning a cell phone bought one after September 11th. If the cultural image we had of the earliest cell phones was of a technology glamorously deployed by the elite, then the image of cell phones today has to include people using them for this final act of communication, as well as terrorists who used cell phones as detonators in the bombing of trains in Madrid.

Of course, the perceived need for a technological safety device can encourage distinctly irrational behavior and create new anxieties. Recently, when a professor at Rutgers University asked his students to experiment with turning off their cell phones for 48 hours, one young woman told *University Wire*, "I felt like I was going to get raped if I didn't have my cell phone in my hand. I carry it in case I need to call someone for help." Popular culture endorses this image of cell-phone-as-life-line. The trailer for a new suspense movie, *Cellular*, is currently making the rounds in theaters nationwide. In it, an attractive young man is shown doing what young men apparently do with their camera-enabled cell phones: taking pictures of women in bikinis and e-mailing the images to himself. When he receives a random but desperate phone call from a woman who claims to be the victim of a kidnapping, he finds himself drawn into a race to find and save her, all the while trying to maintain that tenuous cell phone connection. It is indicative of our near-fetishistic attachment to our cell phones that we can relate (and treat as a serious moment of suspense) a scene in the movie where the protagonist, desperately trying to locate a cell phone charger before his battery runs out, holds the patrons of an electronics store at gunpoint until the battery is rejuvenated. After scenes of high-speed car chases and large explosions, the trailer closes with a disembodied voice asking the hero, "How did you get involved?" His response? "I just answered my phone."

Many parents have responded to this perceived need for personal security by purchasing cell phones for their children, but this, too, has had some unintended consequences. One sociologist has noted that parents who do this are implicitly commenting on their own sense of security or insecurity in society. "Claiming to care about their children's safety," Chantal de Gournay writes, "parents develop a 'paranoiac' vision of the community, reflecting a lack of trust in social institutions and in any environment other than the family." As a result, they choose surveillance technologies, such as cell phones, to monitor their children, rather than teaching them (and trusting them) to behave appropriately. James E. Katz, a communications professor at Rutgers who has written extensively about wireless communication, argues that parents who give children cell phones are actually weakening the traditional bonds of authority; "parents think they can reach kids any time they want, and thus are more indulgent of their children's wanderings," Katz notes. Not surprisingly, "my cell phone battery died" has become a popular excuse among teenagers for failure to check in with their parents. And I suspect nearly everyone, at

some point, has suffered hours of panic when a loved one who was supposed to be “reachable” failed to answer the cell phone.

Although cell phones are a technology with broad appeal, we do not all use our cell phones in the same way. In June 2004, Cingular announced that “for the fourth year in a row, men prove to be the more talkative sex in the wireless world,” talking 16 percent more on their phones than women. Women, however, are more likely to use a cell phone “to talk to friends and family” while men use theirs for business—including, evidently, the business of mating. Researchers found that “men are using their mobile phones as peacocks use their immobilizing feathers and male bullfrogs use their immoderate croaks: To advertise to females their worth, status, and desirability,” reported the *New York Times*. The researchers also discovered that many of the men they observed in pubs and nightclubs carried fake cell phones, likely one of the reasons they titled their paper “Mobile Phones as Lekking Devices Among Human Males,” a lek being a “communal mating area where males gather to engage in flamboyant courtship displays.” Or, as another observer of cell phone behavior succinctly put it: “the mobile is widely used for psychosexual purposes of performance and display.”

The increasingly sophisticated accessories available on cell phones encourage such displays. One new phone hitting the market boasts video capture and playback, a 1.2 megapixel camera, a 256 color screen, speakerphone, removable memory, mp3 player, Internet access, and a global positioning system. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported on cell phones that will feature radios, calculators, alarm clocks, flashlights, and mirrored compacts. Phones are “becoming your Swiss army knife,” one product developer enthused. Hyperactive peacocking will also be abetted by the new walkie-talkie function available on many phones, which draws further attention to the user by broadcasting to anyone within hearing distance the conversation of the person on the other end of the phone.

With all these accoutrements, it is not surprising that one contributor to a discussion list about wireless technology recently compared cell phones and BlackBerrys to “electronic pets.” Speaking to a group of business people, he reported, “you constantly see people taking their little pets out and stroking the scroll wheel, coddling them, basically ‘petting’ them.” When confined to a basement conference room, he found that participants “were compelled to ‘walk’ their electronic pets on breaks” to check their messages. In parts of Asia, young women carry their phones in decorated pouches, worn like necklaces, or in pants with specially designed pockets that keep the phone within easy reach. We have become

thigmophilic with our technology—touch-loving—a trait we share with rats, as it happens. We are constantly taking them out, fiddling with them, putting them away, taking them out again, reprogramming their directories, text messaging. And cell phone makers are always searching for new ways to exploit our attachments. Nokia offers “expression” phones that allow customization of faceplates and ring tones. Many companies, such as Modtones, sell song samples for cell phone ringers. In Asia, where cell phone use among the young is especially high, companies offer popular anime and manga cartoons as downloadable “wallpaper” for cell phones.

Cell phone technology is also creating new forms of social and political networking. “Moblogging,” or mobile web logging, allows cell phone users to publish and update content to the World Wide Web. An increasing number of companies are offering cell phones with WiFi capability, and as Sadie Plant noted recently in a report she prepared for Motorola, “On the Mobile,” “today, the smallest Motorola phone has as much computing power in it as the largest, most expensive computer did less than a generation ago.” In his *Forbes* “Wireless Outlook” newsletter, Andrew Seybold predicted, “in twenty five years there aren’t going to be any wired phones left and I think it might happen even much sooner than that—ten to fifteen years.” As well, “the phone will be tied much more closely to the person. Since the phone is the person, the person will be the number.” It isn’t surprising that one of Seybold’s favorite movies is the James Coburn paranoid comedy, *The President’s Analyst* (1967), whose premise “centered on attempts by the phone company to capture the president’s psychoanalyst in order to further a plot to have phone devices implanted in people’s brains at birth.” Ma Bell meets *The Manchurian Candidate*.

Dodgeball.com, a new social-networking service, applies the principles of websites such as Friendster to cell phones. “Tell us where you are and we’ll tell you who and what is around you,” Dodgeball promises. “We’ll ping your friends with your whereabouts, let you know when friends-of-friends are within ten blocks, allow you to broadcast content to anyone within ten blocks of you or blast messages to your groups of friends.” The service is now available in fifteen cities in the U.S., enabling a form of friendly pseudo-stalking. “I was at Welcome to the Johnson’s and a girl came up behind me and gave a tap on the shoulder,” one recent testimonial noted. “Are you this guy?” she inquired while holding up her cell phone to show my Dodgeball photo. I was indeed.”

Political organizers have also found cell phone technology to be a valuable tool. Throughout 2000 in the Philippines, the country’s many cell

phone users were text-messaging derogatory slogans and commentary about then-President Joseph Estrada. With pressure on the Estrada administration mounting, activists organized large demonstrations against the president by activating cell phone “trees” to summon protesters to particular locations and to outmaneuver riot police. Estrada was forced from office in January 2001. Anti-globalization protesters in Seattle and elsewhere (using only non-corporate cell phones, surely) have employed the technology to stage and control movements during demonstrations.

Communication Delinquents

The ease of mobile communication does not guarantee positive results for all those who use it, of course, and the list of unintended negative consequences from cell phone use continues to grow. The BBC world service reported in 2001, “senior Islamic figures in Singapore have ruled that Muslim men cannot divorce their wives by sending text messages over their mobile phones.” (Muslims can divorce their wives by saying the word “talaq,” which means “I divorce you,” three times).

Concerns about the dangers of cell phone use while driving have dominated public discussion of cell phone risks. A 2001 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimated that “54 percent of drivers ‘usually’ have some type of wireless phone in their vehicle with them” and that this translates into approximately 600,000 drivers “actively using cell phones at any one time” on the road. Women and drivers in the suburbs were found to talk and drive more often, and “the highest national use rates were observed for drivers of vans and sport utility vehicles.” New York, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. all require drivers to use hands-free technology (headsets or speakerphones) when talking on the cell.

Cell phones can also play host to viruses, real and virtual. A 2003 study presented at the American Society for Microbiology’s conference on infectious disease found that twelve percent of the cell phones used by medical personnel in an Israeli hospital were contaminated with bacteria. (Another recent cell phone-related health research result, purporting a link between cell phone use and decreased sperm counts, has been deemed inconclusive.) The first computer virus specifically targeting cell phones was found in late June. As *The Guardian* reported recently, anti-virus manufacturers believe that “the mobile phone now mirrors how the Net has developed over the past two or three years—blighted with viruses as people got faster connections and downloaded more information.”

With technology comes addiction, and applicable neologisms have entered the lexicon—such as “crackberry,” which describes the dependence exhibited by some BlackBerry wireless users. In a 2001 article in *New York* magazine about feuding couples, one dueling duo, Dave and Brooke, traded barbs about her wireless addictions. “I use it when I’m walking down the street,” Brooke said proudly. “She was checking her voice mail in the middle of a Seder!” was Dave’s exasperated response. “Under the table!” Brooke clarified. A recent survey conducted by the Hospital of Seoul National University found that “3 out of 10 Korean high school students who carry mobile phones are reported to be addicted” to them. Many reported feeling anxious without their phones and many displayed symptoms of repetitive stress injury from obsessive text messaging.

The cell phone has also proven effective as a facilitator and alibi for adulterous behavior. “I heard someone (honest) talking about their ‘shag phone’ the other day,” a visitor to a wireless technology blog recently noted. “He was a married man having an affair with a lady who was also married. It seems that one of the first heady rituals of the affair was to purchase a ‘his and her’ pair of pre-pay shag phones.” A recent story in the *New York Times* documented the use of cell phone “alibi and excuse clubs” that function as an ethically challenged form of networking—Dodgeball for the delinquent. “Cell phone-based alibi clubs, which have sprung up in the United States, Europe, and Asia, allow people to send out mass text messages to thousands of potential collaborators asking for help. When a willing helper responds, the sender and the helper devise a lie, and the helper then calls the victim with the excuse,” the report noted. One woman who started her own alibi club, which has helped spouses cheat on each other and workers mislead their bosses, “said she was not terribly concerned about lying,” although she did concede: “You wouldn’t really want your friends to know you’re sparing people’s feelings with these white lies.” Websites such as Kargo offer features like “Soundster,” which allows users to “insert sounds into your call and control your environment.” Car horns, sirens, the coughs and sniffles of the sick room—all can be simulated in order to fool the listener on the other end of the call. Technology, it seems, is allowing people to make instrumental use of anonymous strangers while maintaining the appearance of trustworthiness within their own social group.

Technology has also led to further incursions on personal privacy. Several websites now offer “candid pornography,” peeping-Tom pictures taken in locker rooms, bathrooms, and dressing rooms by unscrupulous

owners of cell phone cameras. Camera phones pose a potentially daunting challenge to privacy and security; unlike old-fashioned cameras, which could be confiscated and the film destroyed, digital cameras, including those on cell phones, allow users to send images instantaneously to any e-mail address. The images can be stored indefinitely, and the evidence that a picture was ever taken can be destroyed.

Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?

Certain public interactions carry with them certain unspoken rules of behavior. When approaching a grocery store checkout line, you queue behind the last person in line and wait your turn. On the subway, you make way for passengers entering and exiting the cars. Riding on the train, you expect the interruptions of the ticket taker and the periodic crackling blare of station announcements. What you never used to expect, but must now endure, is the auditory abrasion of a stranger arguing about how much he does, indeed, owe to his landlord. I've heard business deals, lovers' quarrels, and the most unsavory gossip. I've listened to strangers discuss in excruciating detail their own and others' embarrassing medical conditions; I've heard the details of recent real estate purchases, job triumphs, and awful dates. (The only thing I haven't heard is phone sex, but perhaps it is only a matter of time.) We are no longer *overhearing*, which implies accidentally stumbling upon a situation where two people are talking in presumed privacy. Now we are all simply *hearing*. The result is a world where social space is overtaken by anonymous, unavoidable background noise—a quotidian narration that even in its more interesting moments rarely rises above the tone of a penny dreadful. It seems almost cruel, in this context, that Motorola's trademarked slogan for its wireless products is "Intelligence Everywhere."

Why do these cell phone conversations bother us more than listening to two strangers chatter in person about their evening plans or listening to a parent scold a recalcitrant child? Those conversations are quantitatively greater, since we hear both sides of the discussion—so why are they nevertheless experienced as qualitatively different? Perhaps it is because cell phone users harbor illusions about being alone or assume a degree of privacy that the circumstances don't actually allow. Because cell phone talkers are not interacting with the world around them, they come to believe that the world around them isn't really there and surely shouldn't intrude. And when the cell phone user commandeers the space by talking, he or she sends a very clear message to others that they are powerless to

insist on their own use of the space. It is a passive-aggressive but extremely effective tactic.

Such encounters can sometimes escalate into rude intransigence or even violence. In the past few years alone, men and women have been stabbed, escorted off of airplanes by federal marshals, pepper-sprayed in movie theaters, ejected from concert halls, and deliberately rammed with cars as a result of their bad behavior on their cell phones. The *Zagat* restaurant guide reports that cell phone rudeness is now the number one complaint of diners, and *USA Today* notes that “fifty-nine percent of people would rather visit the dentist than sit next to someone using a cell phone.”

The etiquette challenges posed by cell phones are universal, although different countries have responded in slightly different ways. Writing about the impact of cell phone technology in *The Guardian* in 2002, James Meek noted, with moderate horror, that cell phones now encourage British people to do what “British people aren’t supposed to do: invite strangers, spontaneously, into our personal worlds. We let everyone know what our accent is, what we do for a living, what kind of stuff we do in our non-working hours.” In France, cell phone companies were pressured by the public to censor the last four digits of phone numbers appearing on monthly statements, because so many French men and women were using them to confirm that their significant other was having an affair.

In Israel, where the average person is on a cell phone four times as much as the average American, and where cell phone technology boasts an impressive 76 percent penetration rate (the United States isn’t projected to reach that level until 2009), the incursion of cell phones into daily life is even more dramatic. As sociologists Amit Schejter and Akiba Cohen found, there were no less than ten cell phone interruptions during a recent staging of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* at Israel’s National Theater, and “there has even been an anecdote reported of an undertaker’s phone ringing inside a grave as the deceased was being put to rest.” The authors explain this state of affairs with reference to the Israeli personality, which they judge to be more enthusiastic about technology and more forceful in exerting itself in public; the subtitle of their article is “chutzpah and chatter in the Holy Land.”

In the U.S., mild regional differences in the use of cell phones are evident. Reporting on a survey by Cingular wireless, CNN noted that cell phone users in the South “are more likely to silence their phones in church,” while Westerners “are most likely to turn a phone off in libraries, theaters, restaurants, and schools.” But nationwide, cell phones still frequently

interrupt movie screenings, theater performances, and concerts. Audience members are not the sole offenders, either. My sister, a professional musician, told me that during one performance, in the midst of a slow and quiet passage of Verdi's *Requiem*, the cell phone of one of the string players in the orchestra began ringing, much to the horror of his fellow musicians.

We cannot simply banish to Tartarus—the section of Hades reserved for punishment of the worst offenders—all those who violate the rules of social space. And the noise pollution generated by rude cell phone users is hardly the worst violation of social order; it is not the same as defacing a statue, for example. Other countries offer some reason for optimism: In societies that maintain more formality, such as Japan, loud public conversation is considered rude, and Japanese people will often cover their mouths and hide their phones from view when speaking into them.

Not surprisingly, Americans have turned to that most hallowed but least effective solution to social problems: public education. Cingular Wireless, for example, has launched a public awareness campaign whose slogan is “Be Sensible.” The program includes an advertisement shown in movie theaters about “Inconsiderate Cell Phone Guy,” a parody of bad behavior that shows a man talking loudly into his cell phone at inappropriate times: during a date, in a movie, at a wedding, in the middle of a group therapy session. It is a miniature manners nickelodeon for the wireless age. July is now officially National Cell Phone Courtesy Month, and etiquette experts such as Jacqueline Whitmore of the Protocol School of Palm Beach advise companies such as Sprint about how to encourage better behavior in their subscribers. Whitmore is relentlessly positive: “Wireless technology is booming so quickly and wireless phones have become so popular, the rules on wireless etiquette are still evolving,” she notes on her website. She cites hopeful statistics culled from public opinion surveys that say “98 percent of Americans say they move away from others when talking on a wireless phone in public” and “the vast majority (86 percent) say they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ speak on wireless phones while conducting an entire public transaction with someone else such as a sales clerk or bank teller.” If you are wondering where these examples of wireless rectitude reside, you might find them in the land of wishful thinking. There appears to be a rather large disconnect between people’s actual behavior and their reports of their behavior.

Whitmore is correct to suggest that we are in the midst of a period of adjustment. We still have the memory of the old social rules, which remind us to be courteous towards others, especially in confined environments

such as trains and elevators. But it is becoming increasingly clear that cell phone technology itself has disrupted our ability to insist on the enforcement of social rules. Etiquette experts urge us to adjust—be polite, don't return boorish behavior with boorish behavior, set a standard of probity in your own use of cell phones. But in doing so these experts tacitly concede that every conversation is important, and that we need only learn how and when to have them. This elides an older rule: when a conversation takes place in public, its merit must be judged in part by the standards of the other participants in the social situation. By relying solely on self-discipline and public education (or that ubiquitous modern state of "awareness"), the etiquette experts have given us a doomed manual. Human nature being what it is, individuals will spend more time rationalizing their own need to make cell phone calls than thinking about how that need might affect others. Worse, the etiquette experts offer diversions rather than standards, encouraging alternatives to calling that nevertheless still succeed in removing people from the social space. "Use text messaging," is number 7 on Whitmore's Ten Tips for the Cell Phone Savvy.

These attempts at etiquette training also evade another reality: the decline of accepted standards for social behavior. In each of us lurks the possibility of a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like transformation, its trigger the imposition of some arbitrary rule. The problem is that, in the twenty-first century, with the breakdown of hierarchies and manners, all social rules are arbitrary. "I don't think we have to worry about people being rude intentionally," Whitmore told *Wireless Week*. "Most of us simply haven't come to grips with the new responsibilities wireless technologies demand." But this seems foolishly optimistic. A psychologist quoted in a story by UPI recently noted the "baffling sense of entitlement" demonstrated by citizens in the wireless world. "They don't get sheepish when shushed," he marveled. "You're the rude one." And *contra* Ms. Whitmore, there is intention at work in this behavior, even if it is not intentional rudeness. It is the intentional removal of oneself from the social situation in public space. This removal, as sociologists have long shown, is something more serious than a mere manners lapse. It amounts to a radical disengagement from the public sphere.

Spectator Sport

We know that the reasons people give for owning cell phones are largely practical—convenience and safety. But the reason we answer them whenever they ring is a question better left to sociology and psychology.

In works such as *Behavior in Public Spaces*, *Relations in Public*, and *Interaction Ritual*, the great sociologist Erving Goffman mapped the myriad possibilities of human interaction in social space, and his observations take on a new relevance in our cell phone world. Crucial to Goffman's analysis was the notion that in social situations where strangers must interact, "the individual is obliged to 'come into play' upon entering the situation and to stay 'in play' while in the situation." Failure to demonstrate this presence sends a clear message to others of one's hostility or disrespect for the social gathering. It effectively turns them into "non-persons." Like the piqued lover who rebuffs her partner's attempt to caress her, the person who removes himself from the social situation is sending a clear message to those around him: I don't need you.

Although Goffman wrote in the era before cell phones, he might have judged their use as a "subordinate activity," a way to pass the time such as reading or doodling that could and should be set aside when the dominant activity resumes. Within social space, we are allowed to perform a range of these secondary activities, but they must not impose upon the social group as a whole or require so much attention that they remove us from the social situation altogether. The opposite appears to be true today. The group is expected never to impinge upon—indeed, it is expected to tacitly endorse by enduring—the individual's right to withdraw from social space by whatever means he or she chooses: cell phones, BlackBerrys, iPods, DVDs screened on laptop computers. These devices are all used as a means to refuse to be "in" the social space; they are technological cold shoulders that are worse than older forms of subordinate activity in that they impose visually and auditorily on others. Cell phones are not the only culprits here. A member of my family, traveling recently on the Amtrak train from New York, was shocked to realize that the man sitting in front of her was watching a pornographic movie on his laptop computer—a movie whose raunchy scenes were reflected in the train window and thus clearly visible to her. We have allowed what should be subordinate activities in social space to become dominant.

One of the groups Goffman studied keenly were mental patients, many of them residents at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., and his comparisons often draw on the remarkable disconnect between the behavior of people in normal society and those who had been institutionalized for mental illness. It is striking in revisiting Goffman's work how often people who use cell phones seem to be acting more like the people in the asylum than the ones in respectable society. Goffman describes "occult

involvements,” for example, as any activity that undermines others’ ability to feel engaged in social space. “When an individual is perceived in an occult involvement, observers may not only sense that they are not able to claim him at the moment,” Goffman notes, “but also feel that the offender’s complete activity up till then has been falsely taken as a sign of participation with them, that all along he has been alienated from their world.” Who hasn’t observed someone sitting quietly, apparently observing the rules of social space, only to launch into loud conversation as soon as the cell phone rings? This is the pretense of social participation Goffman observed in patients at St. Elizabeth’s.

Goffman called those who declined to respond to social overtures as being “out of contact,” and said “this state is often felt to be full evidence that he is very sick indeed, that he is, in fact, cut off from all contact with the world around him.” To be accessible meant to be available in the particular social setting and to act appropriately. Today, of course, being accessible means answering your cell phone, which brings you in contact with your caller, but “out of contact” in the physical social situation, be it a crosstown bus, a train, an airplane, or simply walking down the street.

In terms of the rules of social space, cell phone use is a form of communications panhandling—forcing our conversations on others without first gaining their tacit approval. “The force that keeps people in their communication place in our middle-class society,” Goffman observed, “seems to be the fear of being thought forward and pushy, or odd, the fear of forcing a relationship where none is desired.” But middle class society itself has decided to upend such conventions in the service of greater accessibility and convenience. This is a dramatic shift that took place in a very short span of time, and it is worth at least considering the long-term implications of this subversion of norms. The behavioral rules Goffman so effectively mapped exist to protect everyone, even if we don’t, individually, always need them. They are the social equivalent of fire extinguishers placed throughout public buildings. You hope not to have to use them too often, but they can ensure that a mere spark does not become an embarrassing conflagration. In a world that eschews such norms, we find ourselves plagued by the behavior that Goffman used to witness only among the denizens of the asylum: disembodied talk that renders all of us unwilling listeners.

We also use our cell phones to exert our status in social space, like the remnants of the entourage or train, which “led a worthy to demonstrate his status by the cluster of dependent supporters that accompanied him

through a town or a house of parliament.” Modern celebrities still have such escorts (a new cable television series, *Entourage*, tracks a fictional celebrity posse). But cell phones give all of us the unusual ability to simulate an entourage. My mother-in-law recently found herself sharing an elevator (in the apartment building she’s lived in for forty years) with a man who was speaking very loudly into his cell phone. When she asked him to keep his voice down, he became enraged and began yelling at her; he was, he said, in the midst of an “important” conversation with his secretary. He acted, in other words, as if she’d trounced on the hem of his royal train. She might have had a secretary too, of course—for all he knew she might have a fleet of assistants at her disposal—but because she wasn’t communicating with someone *at that moment* and he, thanks to his cell phone, was, her status in the social space was, in effect, demoted.

The language of wireless technology itself suggests its selfishness as a medium. One of the latest advances is the “Personal Area Network,” a Bluetooth technology used in Palm Pilots and other personal digital assistants. The network is individualized, closed to unwelcome intruders, and totally dependent on the choices of the user. We now have our own technological assistants and networks, quite an impressive kingdom for ordinary mortals. In this kingdom, our cell phones reassure us by providing constant contact, and we become much like a child with a security blanket or Dumbo with his feather. Like a security blanket, which is also visible to observers, cell phones provide the “publicization’ of emotional fulfillment,” as French sociologist Chantal de Gournay has argued. “At work, in town, while traveling—every call on the mobile phone secretly expresses a message to the public: ‘Look how much I’m in demand, how full my life is.’” Unlike those transitional objects of childhood, however, few of us are eager to shed our cell phones.

Absent Without Leave

Our daily interactions with cell phone users often prompt heated exchanges and promises of furious retribution. When *New York Times* columnist Joe Sharkey asked readers to send in their cell phone horror stories, he was deluged with responses: “There is not enough time in the day to relay the daily torment I must endure from these cell-yellers,” one woman said. “There’s always some self-important jerk who must holler his business all the way into Manhattan,” another commuter wearily noted. Rarely does one find a positive story about cell phone users who behaved politely, observing the common social space.

Then again, we all apparently have a cell phone *alter idem*, a second self that we endlessly excuse for making just such annoying cell phone calls. As a society, we are endlessly forgiving of our own personal “emergencies” that require cell phone conversation and easily apoplectic about having to listen to others’. At my local grocery store around 6:30 in the evening, it is not an uncommon sight to see a man in business attire, wandering the frozen food aisle, phone in hand, shouting, “Bird’s Eye or Jolly Green Giant? What? Yes, I got the coffee filters already!” How rude, you think, until you remember that you left your own grocery list on the kitchen counter; in a split second you are fishing for your phone so that you can call home and get its particulars. This is the quintessential actor-observer paradox: as actors, we are always politely exercising our right to be connected, but as observers we are perpetually victimized by the boorish bad manners of other cell phone users.

A new generation of sociologists has begun to apply Goffman’s insights to our use of cell phones in public. Kenneth J. Gergen, for example, has argued that one reason cell phones allow a peculiar form of diversion in public spaces is that they encourage “absent presence,” a state where “one is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere.” You can witness examples of absent presence everywhere: people in line at the bank or a retail store, phones to ear and deep into their own conversations—so unavailable they do not offer the most basic pleasantries to the salesperson or cashier. At my local playground, women deep in cell phone conversations are scattered on benches or distractedly pushing a child on a swing—physically present, to be sure, but “away” in their conversations, not fully engaged with those around them.

The first time you saw a person walking down the street having a conversation using a hands-free cell phone device you intuitively grasped this state. Wildly gesticulating, laughing, mumbling—to the person on the other end of the telephone, their street-walking conversation partner is engaged in normal conversation. To the outside observer, however, he looks like a deranged or slightly addled escapee from a psychiatric ward. Engaged with the ether, hooked up to an earpiece and dangling microphone, his animated voice and gestures are an anomaly in the social space. They violate our everyday sense of normal behavior.

The difficulty of harmonizing real and virtual presence isn’t new. As Mark Caldwell noted in *A Short History of Rudeness* about the first telephones, “many early phone stories involved a bumpkin who nods silently

in reply to a caller's increasingly agitated, 'Are you there?'" Even young children know Goffman's rules. When a parent is in front of a child but on the telephone (physically present but mentally "away"), a child will frequently protest—grabbing for the phone or vocalizing loudly to retrieve the parent's attention. They are expressing a need for recognition that, in a less direct and individualized way, we all require from strangers in public space. But the challenge is greater given the sheer number of wireless users, a reality that is prompting a new form of social criticism. As a "commentary on the potential of the mobile phone for disrupting and disturbing social interactions," the Interaction Design Institute Ivrea recently sponsored a project called "Mass Distraction." The project featured jackets and cell phones that only allowed participants to talk on their phones if the large hood of the jacket was closed completely over their head or if they continued to insert coins into the pocket of the jacket like an old fashioned pay phone. "In order to remain connected," the project notes, "the mobile phone user multitasks between the two communication channels. Whether disguised or not, this practice degrades the quality of the interaction with the people in his immediate presence."

Cocooned within our "Personal Area Networks" and wirelessly transported to other spaces, we are becoming increasingly immune to the boundaries and realities of physical space. As one reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* said, in exasperation, "Go ahead, floss in the elevator. You're busy; you can't be expected to wait until you can find a bathroom.... [T]he world out there? It's just a backdrop, as movable and transient as a fake skyline on a studio lot." No one is an outsider with a cell phone—that is why foreign cab drivers in places like New York and Washington are openly willing to ignore laws against driving-and-talking. Beyond the psychic benefits cell phone calls provide (cab driving is a lonely occupation), their use signals the cab driver's membership in a community apart from the ever-changing society that frequents his taxi. Our cell phones become our talismans against being perceived as (or feeling ourselves to be) outsiders.

Talk and Conversation

Recently, on a trip to China, I found myself standing on the Great Wall. One of the members of our small group had hiked ahead, and since the rest of us had decided it was time to get back down the mountain, we realized we would need to find him. Despite being in a remote location at high altitude, and having completely lost sight of him in the hazy late morning

air, this proved to be the easiest of logistical tasks. One man pulled out his cell phone, called his wife back in the United States, and had her send an e-mail to the man who had walked ahead. Knowing that our lost companion religiously checked his BlackBerry wireless, we reasoned that he would surely notice an incoming message. Soon enough he reappeared, our wireless plea for his return having successfully traveled from China to Washington and back again to the Wall in mere minutes.

At the time, we were all caught up in the James Bond-like excitement of our mission. Would the cell phone work? (It did.) Would the wife's e-mail get through to our companion's BlackBerry? (No problem.) Only later, as we drove back to Beijing, did I experience a pang of doubt about our small communications triumph. There, at one of the Great Wonders of the World, a centuries-old example of human triumph over nature, we didn't hesitate to do something as mundane as make a cell phone call. It is surely true that wireless communication is its own wondrous triumph over nature. But cell phone conversation somehow inspires less awe than standing atop the Great Wall, perhaps because atop the Great Wall we are still rooted in the natural world that we have conquered. Or perhaps it is simply because cell phones have become everyday wonders—as unremarkable to us as the Great Wall is to those who see it everyday.

Christian Licoppe and Jean-Philippe Heurtin have argued that cell phone use must be understood in a broader context; they note that the central feature of the modern experience is the “deinstitutionalization of personal bonds.” Deinstitutionalization spawns anxiety, and as a result we find ourselves working harder to build trust relationships. Cell phone calls “create a web of short, content-poor interactions through which bonds can be built and strengthened in an ongoing process.”

But as trust is being built and bolstered moment by moment between individuals, public trust among strangers in social settings is eroding. We are strengthening and increasing our interactions with the people we already know at the expense of those who we do not. The result, according to Kenneth Gergen, is “the erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centered sense of self, moral bearings, depth of relationship, and the uprooting of meaning from material context: such are the dangers of absent presence.”

No term captures this paradoxical state more ably than the word “roam,” which appears on your phone when you leave an area bristling with wireless towers and go into the wilds of the less well connected. The word appears when your cell phone is looking for a way to connect you,

but the real definition of roam is “to go from place to place without purpose or direction,” which has more suggestive implications. It suggests that we have allowed our phones to become the link to our purpose and the symbol of our status—without its signal we lack direction. Roaming was a word whose previous use was largely confined to describing the activities of herds of cattle. In her report on the use of mobile phones throughout the world, Sadie Plant noted, “according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the earliest uses of the word ‘mobile’ was in association with the Latin phrase *mobile vulgus*, the excitable crowd,” whence comes our word “mob.”

Convenience and safety—the two reasons people give for why they have (or “need”) cell phones—are legitimate reasons for using wireless technology; but they are not neutral. Convenience is the major justification for fast food, but its overzealous consumption has something to do with our national obesity “epidemic.” Safety spawned a bewildering range of anti-bacterial products and the overzealous prescription of antibiotics—which in turn led to disease-resistant bacteria.

One possible solution would be to treat cell phone use the way we now treat tobacco use. Public spaces in America were once littered with spittoons and the residue of the chewing tobacco that filled them, despite the disgust the practice fostered. Social norms eventually rendered public spitting déclassé. Similarly, it was not so long ago that cigarette smoking was something people did everywhere—in movie theaters, restaurants, trains, and airplanes. Non-smokers often had a hard time finding refuge from the clouds of nicotine. Today, we ban smoking in all but designated areas. Currently, cell phone users enjoy the same privileges smokers once enjoyed, but there is no reason we cannot reverse the trend. Yale University bans cell phones in some of its libraries, and Amtrak’s introduction of “quiet cars” on some of its routes has been eagerly embraced by commuters. Perhaps one day we will exchange quiet cars for wireless cars, and the majority of public space will revert to the quietly disconnected. In doing so, we might partially reclaim something higher even than healthy lungs: civility.

This reclaiming of social space could have considerable consequences. As sociologist de Gournay has noted, “the telephone is a device ill suited to listening ... it is more appropriate for exchanging information.” Considering Americans’ obsession with information—we are, after all, the “information society”—it is useful to draw the distinction. Just as there is a distinction between information and knowledge, there is a vast difference between conversation and talk.

Conversation (as opposed to “talk”) is to genuine sociability what courtship (as opposed to “hooking up”) is to romance. And the technologies that mediate these distinctions are important: the cell phone exchange of information is a distant relative of formal conversation, just as the Internet chat room is a far less compelling place to become intimate with another person than a formal date. In both cases, however, we have convinced ourselves as a culture that these alternatives are just as good as the formalities—that they are, in fact, improvements upon them.

“A conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf,” Goffman wrote. “It is a little social system with its own boundary-making tendencies; it is a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own villains.” According to census data, the percentage of Americans who live alone is the highest it has ever been in our country’s history, making a return to genuine sociability and conversation more important than ever. Cell phones provide us with a new, but not necessarily superior means of communicating with each other. They encourage talk, not conversation. They link us to those we know, but remove us from the strangers who surround us in public space. Our constant accessibility and frequent exchange of information is undeniably useful. But it would be a terrible irony if “being connected” required or encouraged a disconnection from community life—an erosion of the spontaneous encounters and everyday decencies that make society both civilized and tolerable.