

Women on the move: the mobile phone as a gender technology

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Introduction

Our lives are increasingly performed within a mobile context. The mobile phone is with us every step we take, from the moment we wake up to its alarm function to dropping off to sleep after sending our last text message and even during our sleep as it stands (turned on) awaiting on our bedside table. There is unanimity over the profound impact mobile communications is having on the way we live, interact with others and perceive the world. The mobile phone also acquires symbolic aspects in different cultures and groups and is closely related to aesthetics and fashion, rendered a cultural object. Building on the theory of the social shaping of technology, when technologies change or emerge “we can expect contest over social categories such as gender” (Lerman et al., 2003).

Grounding this research in previous findings and feminist theory, this paper presents a view of the mobile phone as a new media and a “technology of gender”, a place of gender construction and transformation.

1. Feminism and the Media

Feminist theory dismisses the view as to any essentialist dimension of gender. Gender is thus a cultural construction (Beauvoir, 1989: 12; Butler, 1999; Haraway,

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1991) and in Simone de Beauvoir words, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman”.

With second wave feminism began the systematic analysis of the media as sites of gender construction. The media thus acquire primordial importance for feminist critique. Representation, especially visual representation, has been an important question for feminism. The argument has been that “the way women perceived themselves and were perceived was ineluctably shaped by the ways in which images of women were constructed and communicated to the population at large” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: 135).

Feminist critique argues that meaning is created through the media. Media texts are no longer objective but rich in meaning. In the Foucaultian sense, meaning certainly cannot be reduced to an innocuous message. Then again, there is a growing awareness among feminists that social and political power are won and lost in representation: “As Debord says, in the society of Spectacle only what appears exists, and the major media have something approaching a monopoly over what appears to the general population” (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 340).

With third wave feminism and the work of authors such as Liesbet Van Zoonen came new forms of handling these themes dissociating them from a vision of the media as solely a means of transmitting hegemonic and patriarchal messages. Van Zoonen proposes a new vision where meaning assumes many different forms:

Meaning is understood as constructed out of the historically and socially situated negotiation between institutional producers of meaning and audiences as producers of meaning. Meaning is no longer conceptualized as a more or less consistent entity, but is seen as contradictory, divided and plural, in other words polysemic. (Zoonen, 1994: 27)

Two main ideas emerge: there is a growing awareness that differences affect the female subject and that representations are not expressive of any prior reality, but rather actively constitutive of reality itself. Within this framework, Teresa de Lauretis proposes gender as a product of various social technologies, among which media such as television, mobile phones, radio, newspapers merely open up the possibilities for gender transformation.

The construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender (e.g., cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g., theory) with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and “implant” representations of gender. But the terms of a different construction of gender also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also play a role in the construction

of gender, and their effects are rather at the “local” level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation. (Lauretis, 2004: 18)

Lauretis’ concept of “technology of gender” is rooted in Foucault’s “technology of sex” defined as “a set of techniques for maximizing life”. Lauretis takes it further and proposes that technologies of gender concern themselves “not only with how the representation of gender is constructed by the given technology, but also how it becomes absorbed subjectively by each individual whom that technology addresses” (Lauretis, 2004: 223). Similarly, Donna Haraway defends the need to go beyond criticism of representation and to incorporate the female subject in its multiplicity and subjectivity. For these authors, there is no room for the earlier feminist perspective of the media as conveyers of distorted images of women and of audiences as passive receivers of those images. Thus, if society is co-produced with technology, the gender effect cannot be ignored in the design, development, innovation and communication of products. The emergent “technofeminism” theory defends a relationship in which technology is, at the same time, cause and consequence of gender relations (Wajcman, 2004: 107)

The archetype in Western thought is that women’s use of technology is mostly presented or viewed as dystopic. Women are considered culturally the guardians of nature. It is they who become pregnant; it is they who raise children. Their usage of technology is viewed as a corruption of nature. In this context, Haraway’s cyborg is heavily provocative. The cyborg is a creature of a post-gender world that ends with all dualisms, namely the polarity of the public and private, a hybrid of human being and machine through which our sense of connection to our tools is heightened.

Building on the concept of culturally constructed gender, woman’s alienation from technologies has been explained by feminist theory, not in essentialist terms but also as a historical and cultural construction. The construction of gender takes place through what Butler calls “Gender Acts”: a concept rooted in Simone de Beauvoir and the phenomenological doctrine of “constituting acts”. In this post-structuralist analysis, the categories of “man” and “woman” are not “real entities but rather constructions or representations, achieved through discourse, performance and repetition” (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004: xi).

Certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. (...) Body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. (Butler, 2004)

Concepts from phenomenology open the door to Butler's reinterpretation of gender construction. She expands the phenomenological conception of an "act" to present a notion of an act that is socially shared, historically constituted and performative. Gender is played *In-the-World*. Gender acts are conditioned by history, cultural patterns and stereotypes. Technology and its uses are also conditioned: "We take our tools as "relevant" tools within a range of cultural practices that already reveal them as such or such a possibility to act" (Introna, 2007: 130).

However, if we agree that gender is constituted through a repetition of acts, this also opens up the possibility of gender transformation through a different series of repetitions. If gender is constituted, it can be constituted in different ways:

In taking up the tools within the cultural practices as part of being somebody we not only transform the tools and ourselves but also transform (enact) the cultural practices that render possible (and meaningful) the world where we are what we are and our tools are what they are (...) We have become (or rather always have been) cyborgs. (Introna, 2007: 130)

Butler (2004) also establishes an analogy of gender acts for performative acts within theatrical contexts. Due to their performative nature, gender acts are not individual, but rather collective; they imply a social structure and an audience. Furthermore they "are not expressive of a reality; they constitute the reality through their performance" (Bial, 2004), opening up once again the possibility of gender transformation, of constituting a different reality. Since it is performative, gender is "open to the process of parody, mimicry and rescripting, and hence to the possibility of subversion" (Puwar, 2004: 150).

The feminist debate has ranged from the view of technologies as part of a patriarchal framework, shaped and mostly used in destructive and oppressive ways, to the view of technology as a liberating tool for women. I stand on the latter side in keeping with authors such as Donna Haraway: technology can empower women or at least allow for gender transformation. Haraway sees in science and technology the potential to create new meanings and new entities. Provocatively, Haraway proposes the cybernetic organism as an alternative to a pure and deified vision of women (Wajcman, 2004).

Like the cyborg hybrid, the mobile phone is blurring several frontiers: between leisure and work, private and professional usage. As technology leaves the exclusive realm of work and enters everyday life, women feel more tempted to try it out and experiment with it: "We can expect that, as women intensify their usage of technological artefacts, we can see a transformation of women's interests stereotypes" (Skog, 2002: 268).

As many researchers point out, usage figures between men and women are similar (Geser, 2006), the differences appear in qualitative usage (Geser, 2004), its purpose and nature, as well as in the discourse (Lemish & Cohen, 2005). This can also account for the dichotomy of mobile phones with regard to gender acts.

2. Women and Mobile Phones

The mobile phone seems to have a dichotomous performative nature as far as gender is concerned: It can either reinforce traditional roles (Lemish & Cohen, 2005) or perform new meanings (Lee, 2005). This dichotomous nature is well explored in Arnold's work (2003) presenting mobile phones as both "boyish" and "girly".

Arnold uses the Janus metaphor to reveal the "possibility of the presence of tension and contradiction in accounts of sociotechnical outcomes" and uses the specific case of the mobile phone to exemplify the "Janus faced performance of technology". Arnold provides us with an analytic framework that allows for irony and paradox to be taken into account. It also collapses "the distinction between the human and the technical as well as cause and effect" (240). Thus, when the phone is used, humans and mobile phones constitute a "sociotechnical hybrid".

2.1. Reinforcing traditional roles

One of the first studies about mobile phone usage (Rakow & Navarro, 1993) emphasized the mobile phone as reinforcing traditional gender roles, especially women as mothers.

More recent studies have also presented the mobile phone as another site for men and women to act out their traditional gendered identities: activity and technological appropriation for men and dependency and domesticity for women (Lemish & Cohen, 2005), men stressing instrumental phone usage and women using it as a medium for personal and emotional exchange (Cardoso et al., 2007).

Even among teenagers, generally regarded as the source of the most innovative uses and transgressions, there seems to be a desire for rules and for abiding to those rules. Boys and girls reproduce gender stereotypes: boys are more prone to explore new functionalities and features while girls tend to focus on communicational functions (Cardoso et al., 2007; Geser, 2006a; Katz, 2006; Skog, 2002). They

are guardians of codes and subjects of permanent evaluation and criticism (Caron & Caronia, 2007).

On the supply side mobile phone companies also seem to design phones to match the traditional female and male cultures (Skog, 2002) embedding in the technology what Ellen van Oost designates as “Gender Scripts”. Marvin (1988) noticed the constraints of producers and promoters. These constraints go beyond technical or financial matters and rest in the interpretation of usages, conditioned by their history and culture. In the marketing arena, matters are not much different: in North America, advertising campaigns reinforce femininity and heteronormativity (Shade, 2007).

2.2. Performing new meanings

Nevertheless, the mobile phone can also perform new meanings. Lemish and Cohen (2005) have identified a contradiction between traditional discourse and actual mobile phone practices in Israel, the latter indicating a process of feminization. Lee (2005) describes how young South Korean women appropriate the camera phone for cultural production, despite the prevalence of adverts that show men snapping pictures of women.

Through the mobile phone, women are building up more intimate relationships with technology, learning to accept new media and are becoming producers. Indeed, they are performing new cultural meanings.

Recent studies have shown that women are becoming power users of technology with a growing interest in gadgets: both buying and using them. In a study carried out by the Cable TV station *Oxygen*, 77% of women stated that they would prefer a plasma TV to a diamond necklace. They show interest in spending more on technology but feel that they are unable to find what they want. According to a 2007 consumer report from Saatchi & Saatchi, only 9% of respondents feel it important for their gadgets to look feminine. The rest feel “patronised” and “offended” by the pink wrapping choice of most brands.

2.3. Colour

Identity can be expressed through colour. This is a location where the dichotomous nature of mobile phones is again an issue. It is argued that producing it in pink to appeal to women is a “gender script”. The connection between pink and

womanliness has become second nature (Peril, 2002), a social norm to which we conform to avoid punishment and being shamed.

But we could also say that that pink wrapping persists because women continue buying pink wrapped products, precisely to express themselves in an otherwise grey masculine context. When choosing pink mobile phones to highlight their presence, embodying the nature of their positions and as a form of subversion, women are also “articulating within strictly defined boundaries” (Puwar, 2004: 151). They are expressing their right to mobile technology but stating their gender through gender stereotypes because being overly subversive would mean not being accepted. There is pressure on women to highlight their difference from men through exaggerated forms of femininity, as a masque to protect them from retaliation or to hide their intentions, their real power (Puwar, 2004; Riviere, 1929).

The other option is to mimic the hegemonic culture of a male dominated black, grey and silver technological aesthetics. It becomes a trap for women that risk not being able to alter the masculine norm.

2.4. Personalization

With the mobile phone you call a person and not a place. This “personalization of networking” as termed by Barry Wellman, started with the Internet and has peaked with the mobile phone: “the mobile phone could be our personal miniature representative” (Katz, 2006: 51).

This personal connection – which is highly physical – leaves its users wanting mobiles to become a reflection of themselves, an expression of identity. The mobile phone thus becomes a part of us and its loss is compared by many users as a loss of a limb. We do, in fact, lose our connection to our friends, contents, knowledge, comfort and security. The emotional connection translates into terminal personalization through logos, images, ringtones and MMS services, ring-back ringtones and so on.

In a recent study by Larissa Hjorth, it was reported that “female respondents tended to be more decisive and opinionated about their selections, often downloading different screensavers and ringtones rather than using the generic (59).

Ringtones in themselves are also a “performative manifestation and display of (sub)cultural identities in the public sphere” (Elferen & Vries, 2007). Ringtones are “outer performances”, that is, performances for those that geographically surround caller and callee. They are what Sadie Plant calls “stage-poning” (Plant, 2001), a unique opportunity to put something of the callee on display, conveying cultural meanings.

2.5. Space Negotiations

The mobile phone is blurring several frontiers: between leisure and work, but also between private and public life and private and public space. We carry the mobile phone with us everywhere we go and thus mobile conversations become social performances because, contrary to landline telephones, there is an audience (Caron & Caronia, 2007): “A corollary aspect of public phone performance is that sometimes the dynamics of mobile phone use is largely (or even exclusively) for those who are present” (60-61).

The public performance of mobile communications is no longer contained as happened with the telephone contained within a booth. The mobile phone is an extension of its user, but also a virtual presence, an extension of our social network. We “do not take up tools for their own sake. Rather to do something as part of being somebody in particular” (Introna, 2007: 130). We also have to take into account the bodily display of mobile phones because they are “located with our body” (Ilharco, 2007). Thus, mobile phones become fashion statements that convey a visual sense of identity.

Katz (2006) provides a dance analogy for the physical performance of public communication because of its implications in the way others in the environment behave: “In part, the use of a mobile phone in public by one party often requires that the user’s co-present partner adjust themselves in space and pace [...] they must engage in a bit of a choreography” (58). The author grounds this analogy to choreography in Edward’s hall concept of being “in sync”. In the new mobile context, people “need to move in sync”. Rakow and Navarro’s (1993) study of remote-control mothering has shown a traditional gender choreography:

The cellular phone seems to be an extension of the public world when used by men, an extension of the private world when used by women. That is, men use it to bring the public world into their lives. Women tend to use it to take their family lives with them wherever they go. (1993: 155)

There seems to be a gendered etiquette for mobile use in public and for the “dance” that occurs. Women display more discrete behaviour, they are more self-conscious and with a specific choice of tone (Hjorth, 2005). Katz suggests that “there is song too” (2006: 56). The tone and loudness are interpreted as signals of how other should behave.

The new affordances of the mobile phone bring with them a special appeal to the female public. Public places have been environments to women, especially those that are alone: “In the 19th and early 20th century, the presence of a woman

on the street without a man indicated the woman was a public good or prostitute” (Stenson, 2006). That might justify why women also deploy the mobile phone to establish and convey a sense of safety and security (Stenson, 2006), to shield themselves against unwanted attentions. Women are thus creating new actors, the “absent-present”, and “new social events” (Caron & Caronia, 2007). Plant (2001) describes this act as follows:

It was also observed that 60 per cent of lone women had a mobile phone on show – a far higher percentage than that of lone men (47 per cent), men together, or men together with women. Many women saw this reflecting their own experience of the mobile as a valuable means of keeping unwanted attentions at bay. A mobile projects an image of self-containment, and can legitimise solitude: I’m not alone, I’m with my mobile phone. (41)

The mobile phone can also be used to subvert dominant cultural paradigms such as in Japan where young females use the mobile phone to challenge masculine culture in public places: “Through their tactics of play, colourful dress, and mobile phone usage, they fight the hegemony of older men on subways, and in doing so produce space for themselves”. (Stenson, 2006)

Conclusion

Contrary to other technologies, especially the computer and the Internet, mobile phones are egalitarian and have been adopted almost identically by men and women around the globe. The characteristics of the mobile phone seem to have a special appeal to women and led to their rapid adoption. In this way, mobile phones seem to be contributing to the blurring of gender differences (Lemish & Cohen, 2005).

The mobile phone is transforming the way women deal with technology by levelling differences between sexes. While it is true that women seem to approach the mobile phone in a more masculine manner, the contrary is also true. There seems to be a feminization of the mobile phone (Shade, 2007). Boundaries are not only being crossed but also blurred.

If in numbers there seems to be a trend towards equal use, in daily practices the mobile phone is a place of gender performance, either to reinforce traditional roles, or to transform gender, constructing new meanings. Colour, expression and space are important aspects of performance as communication and performance as construction of meaning. Thus, mobile acts are also moving acts, that is, they change according to the cultural context of appropriation.

The choice of colour is one of the first examples of the moving nature of mobile acts. Choosing pink phones might either be an option to conform to the masculine norm that states “pink is for women” and abiding by “gender scripts”, a form of using femininity as a masque against retaliation or of disguising power uses of technology that would confront men, or a form of self-expression on an otherwise black and grey stage.

Expression is another dimension of shifting genders that translates into mobile phone personalisation. As with colour, personalization contents are also subject to gender scripting with brands and companies missing out on a huge potential for marketing and selling personalization contents to women. Contents that do not abide by the stereotype of: “cute” pictures and “soft” music.

Finally, women present themselves as “space invaders” (Puwar, 2004), they are conquering spaces that were traditionally hostile to them. Women are “nomadic subjects” (Braidotti, 1994), crossing and invading boundaries and patriarchal heritages. Once again, the mobile phone serves multiple purposes: as a defence mechanism, to legitimate the public presence of women and to challenge the norm.

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