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Technology and society: Anthropologists investigate the use of communications technology and reach some surprising conclusions

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SUCH is the social significance of mobile phones that when it comes to evaluating their use and planning new products and services, mobile operators and handset-makers cannot rely on the technology-driven, engineering mindset that has traditionally dominated the telecoms industry. Most famously, industry leaders expected people to embrace videotelephony, which flopped, but failed to anticipate the success of text-messaging. So they are turning to social scientists, and in particular to anthropologists, the better to understand how telephones are used.

One of Nokia's in-house anthropologists, Jan Chipchase, recently investigated how people carry their phones, for example. He and his colleagues carried out street-level surveys in 11 cities on four continents. They found that 60% of men carried their phones in their trouser pockets, whereas 61% of women carried their phones in handbags. (The difficulty of finding a mobile phone in a cluttered handbag meant that half of women reported missing calls as a result.) Belt pouches were particularly popular in China: 19% of men used them in Beijing, and 38% in Ji Lin City. But they were less popular in fashion-conscious Milan, where only 4% of men used them, and belt pouches were non-existent in Tokyo. Adding covers to phones was most widespread in Seoul and Kampala, and the use of decorative phone straps was most popular in Seoul and Tokyo. Findings like these can help handset-makers design new products and accessories that are appropriate to particular markets.

Meanwhile, Stefana Broadbent, an anthropologist who leads the User Adoption Lab at Swisscom, Switzerland's largest telecoms operator, has been looking at usage patterns associated with different communications technologies. She and her team based their research on observation, interviews, surveys of users' homes and asking people to keep logbooks of their communications usage in several European countries. Some of their findings are quite unexpected. Although mobile phones make it easier to keep in regular touch with a wide group of friends, for example, it turns out that a typical user spends 80% of his or her time communicating with just four other people.

Next, despite much talk of "convergence" within the industry, people are in fact using different communications technologies in distinct and divergent ways. The fixed-line phone "is the collective channel, a shared organisational tool, with most calls made 'in public' because they are relevant to the other members of the household," she says. Mobile calls are for last-minute planning or to co-ordinate travel and meetings. Texting is for "intimacy, emotions and efficiency". E-mail is for administration and to exchange pictures, documents and music. Instant-messaging (IM) and voice-over-internet calls are "continuous channels", open in the background while people do other things. "Each communication channel is performing an increasingly different function," says Ms Broadbent.

Another finding is that despite the plunging cost of voice calls, and the rise of free internet-calling services such as Skype, people seem to prefer typing. "The most fascinating discovery I've made this year is a flattening in voice communication and an increase in written channels," says Ms Broadbent. Her research in Switzerland and France found that even when people are given unlimited cheap or free calls, the number and length of calls does not increase significantly. This may be because there is only so much time you can spend talking; and when you are on the phone it is harder to do other things. Written channels such as e-mail, text-messaging and IM, by contrast, are discreet and allow contact to be continuous during the day. "Users are showing a growing preference for semi-synchronous writing over synchronous voice," says Ms Broadbent.

And although the rise of the BlackBerry has prompted concern about work invading private life, the opposite actually seems to be true: private communications are invading the workplace. Workers expect to be plugged into their social networks while at work, whether by e-mail, IM or mobile phone. Last year at a food-processing factory near Geneva, the workers revolted when the director tried to ban mobile phones from the factory floor, and he was forced to relent. Their argument was that they wanted to be reachable during the day, just as people who sit at desks are.

Of course, improvements to mobile networks and the spread of third-generation (3G) and Wi-Fi networks mean that you no longer need to be at your desk to get things done. But Ms Broadbent found that there is not, in fact, much appetite for working while on the move. Indeed, she calls this "the hypermobility myth". After studying workers who spend more than half their time out of the office—salesmen, consultants, pilots, journalists and photographers—she found that they generally stick to communications while on the move, gathering information that they then work on when they get back to their desks. Hotel rooms and airports are, she says, "not seen as an appropriate environment for substantive work" and are mainly used for e-mail.

Finally, Ms Broadbent found that migrants are the most advanced users of communications technology. A family of immigrant workers from Kosovo living in Switzerland has installed a big computer screen in their living room, for example, and almost every morning they have breakfast with their grandmother back home, via a webcam. It is migrants, rather than geeks, who have emerged as the "most aggressive" adopters of new communications tools, says Ms Broadbent. Dispersed families with strong ties and limited resources have taken to voice-over-internet services, IM and webcams, all of which are cheap or free. They also go online to get news or to download music from home. In the case of a Spanish family living in Switzerland, the daughter often does her homework with her aunt—but over a free Skype video-link, since the aunt lives in Spain.

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