

## then cooling our engines.

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Mobile world

### 'Hi, I'm in G2'

On New Year's Day 1985, Ernie Wise made Britain's first cellphone call. Now, less than two decades later, most people in this country have a mobile and every sixth person in the world owns one. They have launched revolutions, saved lives, destroyed relationships and, of course, spawned a whole new genre of utterly pointless communication. Kicking off a 28-page G2 special, James Meek looks at how the mobile phone has changed our world

James Meek

The Guardian, Monday November 11, 2002

**By the year 2000, Mintel suggests that small pocketphones "will be as common as Walkmans..." People would have to develop a whole new social code... You could not, for example, take calls in the middle of a crowded restaurant. Indeed, the potential nuisance effect of pocketphones (which, of course, exist at the moment, but are clumsy and extremely expensive) is enormous, though perhaps no more so than the nuisance of the transistor radio. Besides, the social value of being able to make a phone call at any time will also be extremely large.**

The Guardian, May 6 1986

It's about 7.15 on a chilly Wednesday evening in October, outside Great Portland Street tube station in London. There aren't many people about. A woman in her 20s in a blue denim skirt and a body warmer strides up to a bus stop, talking loudly into a mobile phone pressed to her ear. Without consciously eavesdropping, I hear what she is saying.

"Next week it's Corinne's birthday, which, if we're around, I think we should go to," she says. "No, but if we're around we should make an effort 'cos nobody's going." She speaks with a particular volume and pitch: far more loudly than if she was speaking to someone next to her, not quite as loud as if she was addressing a public meeting. She has none of the self-consciousness people usually feel when they are by themselves among strangers, because she isn't by herself.

Physically, she's in Great Portland Street, but she's speaking as if she is in her front room, talking to her partner a few feet away. That room could be in Peckham, or Durham, or Birmingham, Alabama - but I might as well be standing there, too, listening, discovering, without wanting to know, that Corinne isn't very popular. (She wasn't really called Corinne by the way).

Before 1985, no one in Britain had a true mobile. Now, most people have one. Every sixth person in the world has one. This year the number of mobile subscribers around the world is likely to reach 1.4 billion, greater, for the first time, than the number of land lines. As today's Guardian/ICM poll shows, we have been using the phone more and more since the advent of the mobile. The world we know best, the world of ourselves, family and friends, has changed.

It used to be that you had to make an effort to overhear other people's conversations. You had to turn your head to look into their lighted living rooms, glance into their strange lives. Now you have to make an effort not to. We 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. Busy people who don't have time for rows or mutual restatements of love before they leave for work now have them on the bus instead. Research by Orange earlier this year found that 80% of mobile users call their partners every day with a bulletin on their journey to work. The mobile has become the supermarket checkout queue of private life, where everyone gets to clock everyone else's trolley, to see who is on no-fat yoghurt and who's on family-size oven chips.

And we are curious. We know, when the phone rings and there is nothing except a rustling and scratching on the other end when we answer, that someone has called us by accident, and the phone is in their bag or pocket. And we wait, lying to ourselves that we are waiting just in case somebody answers, when we know nobody will. We wait because we hope to overhear some indiscretion. We're terrible.

Body-warmer woman leaves, but at the entrance to Great Portland Street station, on either side, stand two people, a man and a woman, waiting in old-fashioned silence. The man, a slim guy with a goatee, in jeans and a denim jacket, suddenly jumps and scrabbles in his pocket, as if a ferret inside his trousers has bitten him. Will he reach it in time? The jeans are very tight, but he manages to haul out the mobile. He speaks a few lines before the two friends who have just called him appear and he puts the phone away. Seconds later, the scene is repeated with the other person waiting, a woman

A friend told me that, since the coming of the mobile, he misses the obscure pleasure of waiting to see if he is going to be stood up or not. He must be a genuine connoisseur of uncertainty, since he is happily married; but it is true. Punctual people now call or text if they're running five minutes late. Nervous people call from one side of a cinema foyer when they can't see the person they've come to meet on the other. No worries; but no relief, no joy either, because we find out where they are and why they're late long before we start to think they are late. Remember how happy you used to be when, after waiting for half an hour in the rain in those pre-mobile days, you turned on your heel, bitter and angry, and suddenly there was his voice or her hand on your elbow, there they were, all out of breath and smiling and apologetic, anxious to make it up?

With mobiles, of course, it is possible to dump people - romantically, socially - without ever actually admitting that you have dumped them. Another friend complained that, in the mobile age, people tend to circle each other endlessly across great tracts of urban nightlife, making virtual contact without ever coming close enough to touch. You used to make plans for the evening. Now you make assumptions. If you can always contact someone, you can always arrange to meet them. So you never meet them.

### **"I don't care who it is, mate, rules are rules."**

Pilot to Tony Blair when the prime minister protested about having to switch off his mobile as his plane was about to take off. He was taking a call from the Queen.

Visiting Great Portland Street is a small pilgrimage to the man some say took the world's first ever mobile phone call, Londoner David Hughes. The PR woman at Vodafone, which launched Britain's mobile age, was troubled when I asked if anyone knew what the late Ernie Wise had said when he made the inaugural cellphone call on their system on New Year's Day 1985. It was as if I had asked for some quotes from Alfred the Great. But David Hughes went farther back than 17 years ago. He was walking up and down Great Portland Street, lugging a primitive radio telephone of his own devising, in 1879.

The "call" wasn't much - just a regular crackle of static from a makeshift transmitter he'd set up in his lab nearby. But it was a whisper from the future, only three years after Bell had invented the fixed-line telephone.

Hughes, a practical designer, wouldn't be too surprised at the innovations of 2002. The horseless carriages on Great Portland Street move no faster than the horsed ones of his day, and he already knew about electric light. He would probably suss out that the snuff box-like contrivances pressed to the ears of pedestrians were mobile phones. More difficult to understand would be how they could be so small, and how so many people could talk at once without their radio conversations interfering with each other.

US researchers solved the second problem in 1947 with the notion of "cellular" radio. By placing many small, low-powered transmitter-receivers across an area, you divide it into radio "cells". No cell would have the same set of frequencies as any of the adjacent cells, so large numbers of people could use radios in a small area without them interfering. If you could work out a way to automatically switch frequencies as subscribers moved from cell to cell, without interrupting their calls, you would have true mobile, roaming radio, that is, mobile phones.

It took decades for technology to catch up with this vision: computers to do the call switching, batteries light enough to be portable, microchips to identify individual phones, software to enable phones to adjust automatically to wherever they are on the planet. Yet Jon Agar, in his forthcoming book *Constant Touch: A Global History of the Mobile Phone*, argues that technology was not what made mobiles spread around the globe like a virus from the early 90s. Mobiles took hold, he maintains, because they arrived when society was ready for them: a time of individualism asserting itself against old hierarchies - paternalism in the developing world, communism in the former Soviet bloc, the class system and state monopolies in Britain.

Agar points out that in the mid-50s, only one person in Britain was allowed to have a private mobile phone - the Duke of Edinburgh, who had one in his Lagonda coupe. He used to put on funny voices to call his children on an admiralty frequency while he was burning up the Tarmac between Buck House and the west country. The Post Office, which controlled all forms of long-distance communication in those days, apart from carrier pigeons, didn't want anyone messing up its frequencies. It is odd to recall now that, until the early 80s, every private telephone in Britain - the receiver, not just the line - was the property of the Post Office, and could only be installed or repaired by one of its workers.

The legendary phrase "I'm on the train," says Agar, "was a sure indicator that an invisible social boundary had been transgressed. In the early 19th century, the stage coach had been alive with gossip and chatter, as the novels of Jane Austen or the essays of William Hazlitt record. With the arrival of the steam locomotive, however, the talk stopped... Trains transported the body and mind. But a more severe problem lay with those passengers themselves. Who were they?... Rather than commit a social gaffe, travellers on trains in Britain chose silence."

The arrival of mobiles was a catalyst for revolt, or revolting behaviour, depending on your perspective. "It was the individual, not society, that spoke loudly: 'I'm on the train'... the history of mobile phones in Britain is intimately tied to social transformations, class transgressions and competition - not only between technical systems but also between the politics of selfish individuality and the social bonds that tie us."

In 2000, the percentage of the UK population owning mobiles passed the 50% mark for the first time. In 2001, it was announced that almost 50% of British children aged between seven and 16 had one. A few weeks ago, the 261 villagers of Pyecombe, in Sussex, heard that they were to get a new mobile phone mast - their 11th.

**Senior Islamic figures in Singapore have ruled that Muslim men cannot divorce their wives by sending text messages over their mobile phones. The decision ends weeks of debate over the issue after a court in Dubai ruled that a mobile-phone text message was acceptable as a written declaration of divorce. Muslim men are allowed to divorce their wives simply by saying the word "talaq" - I divorce you - three times.**

BBC World Service report, 2001

I used a mobile phone for the first time about 11 years ago, while I was working for the Scotsman in Edinburgh. There was a fire on Princes Street and I was sent to relieve another reporter. "You'd better take the mobile," the news editor said. The paper had just acquired one. Mobiles of that era are often compared to bricks, but this is unfair. Bricks are quite attractive, and relatively light. In hindsight, it is easy to be puzzled by my decision to put the phone in my inside jacket pocket, but I wasn't to know how light mobiles would become a decade later. In the early days of timekeeping it probably seemed perfectly sensible to lash carriage clocks to your forearm: how did they know watches were coming? Anyway, I put it in my pocket. The jacket bulged and sagged to within a foot of the ground. Not hunchback of Notre Dame, exactly, but hunchfront of Waverley station. When I got to the site of the conflagration, I made my first mobile phone call. "I'm at the fire," I said. "It's out."

I spent most of the 90s in the former Soviet Union, cut off from mobile fever in western Europe. On holiday in Italy I remember noticing hordes of young Italians holding their hands to their heads and talking at the tops of their voices to no one in particular, but there seemed nothing unusual about this. Then, in 1996, I had my mobile revelation.

One morning I took an early flight from Moscow to St Petersburg for an interview at the Hermitage museum. In the final stages of our descent, the fog over Petersburg was so low and thick that all we could see were the tops of factory chimneys sticking out of it. The pilot announced that we would have to divert to Pskov, a run-down garrison town near the Estonian border, 100 miles to the south. We landed, disembarked and entered the terminal building, a dank shell of gnawed concrete. The few beaten-up, inter-city call booths in the airport were closed. There was no way I would make the interview, and no way to let the Hermitage know I was late; I had lost the story.

At this point, I saw about a dozen of my fellow passengers, Russian men and women, line up like a guard of honour, and with military synchronicity, lift dinky little mobiles to their faces and reveal to the world that we had been diverted to Pskov. I was amazed at how fast technology and human want had overtaken my understanding of the possible in Russia. I was impressed that so many of the people on the flight had mobiles, when I had thought that they were luxuries for the elite of Moscow; that here, in this obscure provincial town, pretty much the property of a hungry Russian airborne division, the infrastructure to support roaming was in place; and, most of all, that everyone around me took this for granted. I borrowed one of their phones. I got straight through to the Hermitage and told them I was running late. I had to get one of these things.

If the changes wrought in western society by mobiles have been remarkable, the changes in the poorer world have been extraordinary. Britain had a dense, relatively efficient network of private and business phones and callboxes long before mobiles came along, but most parts of the world didn't, and still don't. Traditional state telecommunications monopolies in Africa, Asia and the former Soviet Union made people and organisations wait weeks, months, years for a phone to be put in; vast regions were not connected at all; international calls, and often inter-city calls, involved queueing, begging, and arguing with switchboard operators. The importance of bureaucrats in authoritarian regimes was measured by the number of telephones they had on their desks, ranks of bakelite that declared to humbler visitors not just "I am more powerful than you," but, "My voice can be heard far away, and yours never can."

The coming of the mobile enabled phoneless countries and communities to bypass their sclerotic, poorly maintained, exclusive, low-technology, landline-based systems. The advent of pay-as-you-go brought mobiles within reach of hundreds of millions of people who would never, for financial or bureaucratic reasons, have got a fixed-line phone.

Latest estimates from the International Telecommunication forecast that this year, for the first time, the number of mobile phone subscribers worldwide will exceed the number of fixed phone lines - 1.4 billion versus 1.1 billion. The figures for Africa are particularly striking. Only 3% of Africans have mobiles, but they represent 53% of all phone subscribers on the continent. In some countries with virtually no working phone system before the advent of mobiles, the proportion is much higher. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, there are only 20,000 working land lines, and 150,000 mobile subscribers. In Gabon, there are 37,000 land lines, but more than 250,000 Gabonese have a mobile. Hundreds of thousands of people in Uganda, Tanzania and Cameroon have sidestepped the need for a fixed phone.

China now has more mobile subscribers - 145 million - than the US and Canada put together.

Setting yourself up with a handset and a Sim card is a big investment for anyone in countries where average income is measured in the low hundreds of dollars per month, and voice calls aren't cheap. But text messages are. In the Philippines, 10.5 million people now have a mobile subscription, almost

14% of the population. Last year, exchanges of text messages enabled the broadbased, grassroots opponents of corrupt president Joseph Estrada to spread agit-prop, organise demonstrations and concentrate supporters over a sprawling archipelago, where communications had always been slow and hard before. Estrada fell when hundreds of thousands answered text message calls to assemble for a final, mighty demo. Today, mobilising the forces of revolution has taken on a new meaning.

**"When he hung up, he opened the phone and put the Sim card between his teeth. He chewed it to destroy it. I think he even swallowed it."**

Investigator quoted in Le Figaro on the behaviour of renegade French financier Alfred Sirven when captured after four years on the run. Sirven feared evidence on the chip could be used against him.

We spend a lot of time with our mobiles. In a sense, they become our confidants. They know the names and numbers of our closest friends and associates. They know the numbers last dialled. They carry secrets, and like all confidants, they can betray secrets. On the face of it, mobiles are a great boon to cheaters. In retrospect it seems extraordinary that affairs were ever carried out in Britain when arranging assignations so often must have involved standing in cold, smelly call boxes in the hours of darkness. But the advent of the mobile makes room for a whole new set of suspicions. Why did she switch her phone off in the afternoon? How come his call has an international prefix when he said he was going to Doncaster this weekend? Agar records that in France, mobile providers were obliged to replace the last four digits of the "numbers dialled" column in itemised bills with asterisks, after thousands of men protested that their affairs had been discovered.

The intimacy between human and mobile is not confined to sharing secrets. The mobile becomes an extension of appearance and personality, a fifth element after hands, face and clothes, in one-upmanship ploys.

One trick is to be checking your mobile display constantly while talking to somebody - the modern equivalent, a friend pointed out, of looking over somebody's shoulder at a party while talking to them, making it obvious that you are hoping to see somebody more interesting. The mobile is equally useful for sending the opposite message, that you value your interlocutor's time dearly. What better way than to let your mobile ring out and, without even looking at the display, ostentatiously switch it off, saying: "Sorry about that. Do go on."

There is an irony in mobile status games. The highest status comes from not having a mobile at all - or rather having one, probably several, and having someone else carry and answer them for you. Privilege is all about anachronisms. You have a mobile phone, why not have a mobile receptionist? The first time you call somebody's mobile and get their flunkey on the line is a moment of disillusionment; you thought that getting a person's mobile number signified that they were inviting familiarity. On the contrary. It just means that they have ripped out their answering machine, stuck it in their pocket and vanished into the wide world.

**"Soon after my arrival in the camp, I was told by neighbours of a man who had called them several times on his mobile phone, saying he was buried under the ruins of his house. The last call had come two days before; and though they had tried to call the man again and again, he had not answered. Perhaps he was still alive, the neighbours told me; perhaps only the battery on his mobile phone had died."**

Chivvis Moore, a Palestinian American, on the Jenin refugee camp in the aftermath of an Israeli incursion.

When I asked my wife what was good about having a mobile, she said: "It makes me feel safe." "Safe from what?" "Well, anything can happen." Anything can happen. Your car can break down; alone on a dark road in the night, with a mobile, you can call for help without getting out of the car. You can get lost. You can simply feel alone. Sometimes I wonder what extraordinary thoughts go unthought when people make mobile calls instead of meditating or dreaming as they make their journeys, but more often than that, I suspect, a call takes up a place that would otherwise have been occupied by aimless worrying.

Anything can happen. A friend described how she had accidentally locked herself in the bedroom after her partner had gone to work. Without a mobile, she would have been trapped in there all day. Doors slam. Buildings collapse. Far worse things happen. You go to the office, as you do every day, Monday to Friday, and one morning, an airliner intersects with your life, and you realise immediately that you are very likely to die. If there were a God, he would have noticed by now that things have become quieter, no matter how bad it gets down there; given a choice between praying, and talking to the people we love, we are bound to choose the people every time.

"I want you to know that I love you very much, in case I don't see you again," was what Mark Bingham told his mother, Alice Hoglan, from the hijacked United Airlines flight 93. She picked up the phone at her home in San Francisco and, without really knowing what was going on, heard him reach out to her in his last moments. Hoglan told CNN: "He went on, 'I'm in the air.' He repeated that he loved me. Then he became distracted, as if someone was speaking to him. He said something to the effect that it was true. Then the phone went dead."

Stewart Rushton, who drowned with his nine-year-old son Adam last year, kept up a conversation with the emergency services on his mobile as, lost and disorientated in dense fog on a sandbank on Morecambe Bay, the tide rose. To the last, the police said, even as the water reached his neck, he sounded confident that he would be rescued. The Rushtons' death was a terrible tragedy, but perhaps it was the harbinger of a time to come when no one will die alone, and will make their dying peace

with partner, child, parent, friend, even answering machine or operator, like David Niven in the 1946 film *A Matter of Life or Death*, talking on the radio to controller Kim Hunter as the RAF plane he is flying goes down in the sea.

Not everyone is prepared to go quietly. Much of the reporting in the early hours of the recent Chechen hostage seizure in Moscow focused, as might be expected, on the heartrending mobile phone calls of hostages to their relatives outside the theatre. But there was another, entirely different mobile dimension. Possession of mobile phones enabled hostages to subvert the traditional two-way dialogue between hostage-takers and government, to become third, fourth, 20th parties. From being silent, passive victims, they became participants, and it soon became clear that they feared their own government as much as they feared the Chechens. They were able to air their point of view simply by calling television and radio stations. "Please do not start storming," Tatyana Solnyshkina told NTV. "There are a lot of explosives. Don't open fire on them. I am very scared. I ask you, please do not start attacking."

Over the weekend of the hostage-taking, strange icons popped up on the displays of Moscow's millions of mobile phones, a warning that - presumably at the request of the security services - the city's mobile providers had stopped encrypting their conversations.

There are many ways in which mobiles can be used by governments to watch the people carrying them, whether it is to eavesdrop, see who is calling who, or track movements. It is a power people both fear and desire, and it goes to the heart of what makes mobiles attractive. They are, above all, an instrument of caring. It can be the intrusive, snoopish caring of state surveillance; the neurotic caring of a mother for a son who is really old enough to look after himself; the mutual caring of two lovers for each other; the joking caring of friends; the paid-for caring of the RAC, the duty to care of the doctor. There are parents who would die for the cause of civil liberty who would none the less like nothing better than to slip a device into their children's pockets when they leave the house which reported exactly where they were at all times. The mobile is a symbol of yearning to reach out over great distances and watch over others, to be in more than one place at once, to share thoughts at the speed of thought; to not be alone, and not let others be alone.