



MEDIASHIFT

Your guide to the digital media revolution, with host Mark Glaser

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Mark Glaser: Journalist, Critic, Facilitator, New Media Expert

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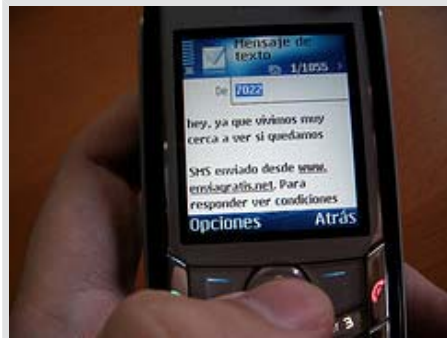
MEDIASHIFT TOPICS

13 JUNE 2008

CELL PHONE CULTURE

Spain's National Obsession with Mobiles, Texting

BY JENNIFER WOODARD MADERAZO, 8:59AM



A few weeks ago I told you about [the perpetuation of print newspapers here in Spain](#), and in that post I mentioned the fact that you don't see a whole lot of laptops being used on the streets of Barcelona or Madrid. One might think that this is an indication of a lack of love for gadgets.

Quite the contrary: You may not see laptops, but what you do see are cell phones — and tons of them.

To say that Spain is crazy for cell phones is an understatement. Approximately 44 million people live in Spain, but in January of this year [the number of cell phones in the country reached 50 million](#). There are more phones than people here. While Americans might also be addicted to the cell, the Spanish relationship with the cell phone has evolved differently from ours for reasons that are clear and others that remain a mystery.

CARDS, PHONES AND MORE PHONES

The mobile phone isn't just a communication tool but also an omnipresent character in Spanish culture. Proof of this is seen constantly on television. Commercial after commercial begs you to send SMS code XXXX to whatever number to get the latest Rihanna ringtone or the anthem of the Barcelona soccer team for your phone. Or to get a popular reality show logo for your cell phone wallpaper. Or to comment on a topic on the news.

Here in Spain, this is what most people think of when you say "mobile content." A lot of money is spent on accessorizing the mobile by ordering games over SMS or on being afforded the right to see your comment crawl across the TV screen when you've got something to say, moments after sending a text message to your favorite show. I can't see most Americans shelling out money for this kind of thing, but Spain [leads the entire European region](#) in purchasing this type of "content." Recent projections show that [Spaniards will download over 17 million games for their cell phones this year](#) over WAP or SMS. Like a pampered pet, the cell phone is forever in hand, and is being primped and well taken care of by its owner.

When I first came to study in Spain in 2002, it didn't take long for me to get a cell phone. My roommate at the time, another graduate student, produced one for me after gasping at the fact that after 3 days in the country I still didn't have a mobile (what I didn't tell him is that I didn't even have one in the U.S.). He quickly pushed a standard issue Nokia on me with SIM card included, and told me what my new phone number was. I didn't get it. How did he do that? Did he work for the phone company? His answer: "Cards!"



He was talking about a pre-paid SIM card, which allows for a cell phone line with no contract and virtually no relationship with the provider. Unlike in the U.S., you can easily get pre-paid SIM cards in Europe



THE WEEK'S TOP 5
PEOPLE, TRENDS AND TECH
ON OUR RADAR

- 1. Yahoo exec-odus**
Search execs jump ship as Yahoo, Google [make deal](#)
- 2. Pay-per-quote**
Embattled AP charges \$12.50 to quote 5 to 25 words
- 3. LinkedIn Cashes In**
Biz social net gets monster \$1 billion valuation
- 4. YouTube on TV**
Five ways to see [the laughing baby](#) on the big screen
- 5. Capitol Words**
The most repeated word in U.S. Congress each day

[Last Week](#) | [Archives](#)

YOUR TAKE

Can newspapers rejuvenate or reinvent classified ads?

RESPOND

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VIA EMAIL

What's this?

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☒ Subscribe ☐ Unsubscribe

SUBMIT

RSS

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NEWS FEED

Examples of cell phone wallpaper

and get talking immediately. In countries like the UK or Germany, you can even buy a SIM card out of a vending machine. You use up your minutes on the card, and then “charge up” the card later at an ATM machine, a grocery checkstand or an Internet cafe. Unlike in the U.S., nearly half of cell phone users in Spain are not under contract with any carrier. Some people have one cell phone with a SIM from Vodafone, and another with a SIM from Orange or some other carrier.

My roommate’s generosity in gifting me a cell phone and telephone number was appreciated, but it was no skin off his nose. He had several handsets lying around as he constantly replaced the older ones with newer ones with better features. I thought this was specific to him but realized soon that most of the people around me in their mid- to late 20s had the same obsession.

I remember asking another roommate, on more than one occasion, if the cell phone she had was new. The answer was almost always yes. The bottom line seemed to be that because cell phones were so accessible and the relationship with the carriers so no-strings-attached, there was an incentive to always get a new one. Not being under contract or getting penalized gave these guys the ability to upgrade their phones when they got tired of them (which was quite frequently). They could then exploit the new features of their devices to the max with add-ons they ordered off TV.

SPAIN: LAND OF SMS

A few days into my new Spanish life back in 2002, someone said to me: “I’ll send you a message” I had no idea what they meant. An email? A message in a bottle? Whatever. Later that evening my phone made a beeping noise and there it was: a message. An SMS message. I hadn’t heard of one nor seen one before, but I soon found out that they were — and are — the language of choice in this country. Spaniards of all ages must spend half of their waking hours sending text messages, and they were doing it back then, when I hadn’t a clue what SMS was.

As if adjusting to a new country weren’t enough, I then had to learn a new language: text messaging. While Americans were in the dark ages of SMS, Europeans had long since embraced the technology. And that’s why Spaniards’ SMS messages — much more evolved — often look like ciphers requiring the intervention of some code expert. Ask someone to go out with you, and they might reply “NT1D” (“I don’t have a cent”). You might tell them you’ll pay and will meet them “>o<” (downtown). If they ask why you are so kind, answer “pqtqm” (“because I like you a lot”). Good thing there’s a [dictionary](#).



Pre-paid SIM cards are easy to get

This strange code has developed over the years as a way for young people to communicate within the standard 140-character limit for text messaging and to save money on their pre-paid cards by only having to send one instead of multiple messages.

Along with the jargon in Spanish, it has developed in parallel (but to a lesser

degree) with the other official languages of Spain, such as Catalan and Basque.

Such has been the influence of SMS language here that [linguistic experts are calling it](#) “the biggest revolution in the language ever.” The same thing has happened in other parts of Europe, and recently French President

Nicholas Sarkozy lamented "what text messaging is doing to the French language."

Whatever it has become, in the beginning it was just a way to save money when communicating. Another very interesting (presumably Spanish) cost-related work-around that I was introduced to and quickly adopted was "the missed call." If you are going to meet up with someone, they might say "I'll do a missed call when I get there." That means they will ring your cell when they arrive so you know to look for them.

The missed call means neither phone is charged a cent, and saves the caller 15 cents or so normally spent on a text message — perfect if you don't have any more credit left on your phone card. As you might imagine, this isn't a perfect science. If two people are just calling and hanging up on each other back and forth and not really communicating any information of substance (like their exact location), you still might not find the person you're looking for.

DIFFERENT MOBILE HISTORIES

When I returned to the U.S. the following year, I brought text messaging with me. Attempting to evangelize people I knew, I found that not a single friend in my inner circle knew what I was talking about. My close friend Andrea, now an ardent text messenger, commented recently that she remembers the first time she received an SMS — from me. I remember her saying at the time "I didn't know my phone could do that kind of thing!"

Why didn't Americans catch on to this sooner? In looking for the answer, I found several theories. One mobile marketer in the UK, Troy Norcross, wrote something back in 2006 which seems to make a lot of sense. He said that it boiled down to two things: ubiquity and cost. Until recently it wasn't possible to send messages to another carrier's number in the U.S.

"Until April 2003 there were no inter-carrier agreements for text messaging," Norcross wrote. "So if you were on Verizon you couldn't send a text message to a subscriber on the Sprint network. The problem in the U.S. was further complicated in that there are at least three different mobile network technologies in use."

And calling in Europe is just a lot more expensive than it is in the U.S. You can easily burn through a 10 euro mobile phone card in less than 10 minutes. With costs like that, it just isn't realistic to make calls if you don't have a cell phone contract. So people found a way around it, and it was SMS.

I asked tech consultant and blogger Michael Mace, who wrote a very detailed and enlightening blog post about the differing mobile cultures, why he thought the use of SMS in Europe evolved the way it did.

"Fixed-line phones were hard to get in Europe and expensive, so mobile phone usage took off there much more aggressively than it did in the U.S." he said. "Prices for texting in Europe were lower than prices for phone calls, so people had an economic incentive to text. In the U.S., mobile service was not as reliable as in Europe, fixed-line phones were cheap, many more people had PCs, and IM was completely free. So texting never became the big force here that it is in Europe (and in much of Asia)."

SMS in Asia is extremely popular; analyst firm Gartner recently projected that the region will send 1.7 trillion text messages in 2008. In Korea for example, according to a study published late last year, Korean youth opt for SMS over email even though email is free, with people considering email "outdated." On the other hand, in Japan, mobile email is far more common than text messaging.



**GOING BEYOND
TEXTING**

Some people have several cell phones in their collection

Upon returning to Spain to live five years later, what's interesting to observe is that while so much has

changed in the mobile space in the U.S., not much has changed here. People are still constantly upgrading their cell phones and texting all day long, and still ordering ringtones and screensavers for their phones. But other ways of interacting with the mobile haven't caught on or at least not as much as back home.

Here, most all of my friends are professionals but none carry Blackberries and none have an Internet data plan on their phones. They don't surf the web on their devices, and they don't send emails. A 2006 study [estimated that only 300,000 workers in Spain used mobile email](#)) and most don't do anything except call and text.

Because Spain seemed so much ahead of the U.S. in using mobile for something more than just calls, one would think that media consumption on phones would be the next logical step, but that hasn't been the case. In 2002, Americans didn't know what SMS was but in 2008 we are texting, watching videos, reading RSS feeds and even using VOIP on our cell phones. In Spain, most people are doing none of that — but you will see a grandmother shoot off text messages like a teenager.

Europe is a large and diverse region, and Spain shouldn't be considered by any means the country that sets the standard for what's going with mobile content in the EU (though Barcelona does host Europe's biggest yearly mobile conference, testament to the interest in the topic here). What I have seen happen here is that people adapt their mobile habits to their circumstances. If calls are expensive, they use SMS. And if calls are so expensive, so are data plans, so forget about using the mobile Internet. So media is inevitably left out of the mobile equation.

This begs the question: where does this leave the iPhone — the mobile Internet lover's phone — which [will be arriving here next month](#)? It's hard to say. I think the shiny newness factor could go over well here, but the inability to text properly on the last version of the iPhone [has been blamed for weak sales in Europe](#).

But I also think that when it comes to content, most people here will rely on their traditional regimen of print newspapers for news and TV and standard Internet for entertainment, unless Spain follows the most recent trends in Europe, which [show mobile data growth of 40% in the EU compared to last year](#).

What do you think? Why do you think cell phone use varies so much from region to region and culture to culture? What are people using the phone for in Europe that they aren't using it for in the U.S. or vice-versa? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Jennifer Woodard Maderazo is the associate editor of PBS MediaShift. She is a writer, blogger and marketer, who also covers Latino cultural issues at [VivirLatino](#).

Text message image by [fluzo](#), SIM card image by [manu contreras](#) and cell phone collection image by [Dr. Won](#), all on Flickr.

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[WORLD VIEW](#)
[PERMANENT LINK TO THIS POST](#)

COMMENTS

Great post!! I studied in Madrid in 2001 and they were so far ahead of the US it was scary. My favorite part was free incoming calls on my

international cell phone--huge during my homesick days :)

StageKid: A Dissertation on Disillusionment

BY STAGEKID 11:53AM ON 13 JUN 08

A good deal of it has to do with the fact that Spain is a very personal, social, community-driven culture and the US is quite simply not at all.

We in the US are staying in contact with technology more and more as we spread with our towns. Spaniards have little need to have a lengthy conversation over the phone and texting works better as it seems that when people want to talk, they meet face to face.

Of course as even Spaniards spread more these days due to cheap budget flights, things like Skype have risen to take up the charge of personal communication at a good price.

Undoubtedly the iPhone will indeed have problems in Spain as Spaniards don't suffer from the problem of [potential utility](#) that Americans do.

Hudin

BY HUDIN 1:34PM ON 13 JUN 08

I too enjoyed this post. I can't imagine ever wanting a cell phone, unless and until I can reliably, cheaply and conveniently (ergonomically) access the internet in my area, but it's fascinating to read about different cultures' uses of these technologies.

BY JHM 5:33AM ON 14 JUN 08

The problem was that, with spanish Telcos, you never know the cost for a mobile internet connection. On the start was really expensive, so people learn to avoid it and get used to SMS.

I think that now, unless its a real flat rate for it we will never widely use Internet on the mobile.

BY JOAQUIN SALVACHUA 6:21AM ON 18 JUN 08

interesting. I wonder if they have stuff like Jott new tech like it over there.

[\(read this article about it\)](#). I'll have to brush up on my spanish before I consider going there though!

BY BRADFORD 11:59AM ON 18 JUN 08
