

In the present conjuncture we find mobiles being framed as media, from a range of industrial, economic, user, producer, audience, cultural, and social perspectives. Already mobile phone networks, devices, and applications are being reconfigured with the offering of mobile television, mobile film, mobile music, mobile radio and audio, mobile games, and mobile internet. The mobile phone is extending beyond communications to incorporate media, and in doing so stands to enlarge its cultural and social significance.

Drawing on a research project on global dimensions of mobiles, this paper focusses upon their guise as media, what is distinctive about these, and what their implications are for approaching a philosophy of telecommunications convergence. In doing so, I draw on cultural and media studies and theory to come to grips with understanding what is unfolding here.

Defining Mobile Media

Around the world there are considerable changes associated with and debates surrounding media. From the extensive literature on contemporary media transformations, there are three factors at play I would note here.

First, there are the changes to media occasioned by the entwined logics of liberalization of markets, on the one hand, and new, convergent technologies, on the other.

Second, there are the contested developments in the social function of media that are reactivating old arguments and anxieties regarding the appearance of new media. Here I would point to the debate over the significance of popular cultural forms circulating in the global mediascapes, such as reality television, infotainment, and the rise of celebrity. Various media and cultural theorists find evidence for the constitution of new kinds of public spheres and modes of citizenship, while others hold alternative views often centering on the shoring up or revision of projects in

which traditional journalism, and ideas of the public sphere, still hold pride of place and critical relevance.

Thirdly, there is the growth in the mediation of communication in everyday life, of which the now indispensable mobile phone is a case in point. Various forms of media culture are also acknowledged to be important for people's construction of identity, for their information, knowledge, and entertainment, for their belonging to communities, nations, and for the creation of new forms of global civil and commercial society, not to mention the activation of political agency.

Mobiles are often discussed in the context of these media changes, and this in itself offers one warrant for taking seriously the term "mobile media".

Another promissory note lies in the integration of mobiles into reinvigorated and reconfigured forms of media.

For instance, the affordances of the cameraphone, and the cultural practices that have quickly become associated with it, have offered the possibility for audiences (such as readers of newspapers or viewers of television) to build on early notions of eye witness, to contribute images of newsworthy events, and to participate in the processes of news-gathering and journalism.¹ The role of the mobile in these new patterns of journalism was prominent in the July 2005 London bombings, where video footage from mobile phones provided early images of the breaking news, whether re-screened on television, or viewed on internet sites and blogs.

Another example is the incorporation of mobiles into the structures and genres of television. This is most strikingly observed in the global format trade of programs such as *Big Brother* and *Idol*, where mobiles have a two-fold function.

First, in the tradition of talk radio and also the long-standing use of the telephone in television, mobiles provide a new feedback channel for viewers. As well as ringing up to speak to a host or register a view, audiences may vote via text message. In addition, mobiles have provided an extension of broadcast platforms (with the possibility of downloading video clips or music to be played on a handset) or fan and magazine culture (downloading ringtones, screensavers, and other paraphernalia). Mobiles have become part of a new conversational, communicative, digital architecture of television through the popularity of text messaging cultures. For their part, mobile carriers and new cultural intermediaries have eager-

¹ For instance, see Henrik Schneider, "The Reporting Mobile: A New Platform for Citizen Media", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Studies: Paradigms and Perspectives*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2007.

ly responded to these developments, commodifying, and extending their possibilities.²

Second, mobile telecommunications networks provide excellent, individualized billing systems, as well as very large groups of subscribers who have been accustomed to paying for voice telephony and data communications, in a way they would find anathema on the internet.

Shortly I will look at recent developments in broadcasting television to mobiles, however I would like first to consider the question of how we might define mobile media.

Like with the mobile phone itself, we need to distinguish analytically between the concept of portable media, on the one hand, and that of mobility, on the other hand. We know of a number of portable media, dead, living, and imagined, from the book and newspaper, through the portable radio, Sony walkman, video camera, portable television sets, to digital devices such as the digital music player, or laptop computer. Yet, as we have discovered with the cellular phone once it untethered itself from vehicles and gained greatly in portability, we need to consider what kinds of mobilities are in fact associated with a technology. Especially with the rise of the thematization of mobilities as a topic of research, we have become sensitized to the existence of various, complex, and interdependent systems of mobility, into which we can fit communications, and now, media.³

This said, though we need to recognize the particular issues posed by concepts of portability and mobility, I do think something important is unfolding that can be thought about with the concept “mobile media” – and that centres on cellular mobile telecommunications.

Mobile media is potentially different from other media in respects that we are still coming to understand. In the 1990s, the cell phone became more than simply a portable voice device; particularly with the development of text messaging and cameraphones as a distinctive facet of mobile phone culture. Now we have the thoroughgoing entry of cellphones into the world of media. This is perhaps most clearly grasped in the sphere of audiovisual production, where mobile film and video makers, for instance, have been preoccupied with experimenting with the aesthetics of the small screen (issues of quality, resolution, and look) and the social and cultural practices of mobile telephony (watching of film on

² On mobile messaging and television see Gerard Goggin and Christina Spurgeon, “Mobiles into Media: Premium Rate SMS and the Adaptation of Television to Interactive Communication Cultures”, *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2007), pp. 317–329.

³ John Urry, *Mobilities*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

handset in a range of new settings, such as in queues, or transit lounges, or public transport).

Mobile media, then, are precipitating the rethinking of relatively stable, culturally central media, such as film and television. Mobiles are also critically implicated in the directions of the newer online media, notably internet and games.

Emerging Mobile Media: The Case of Mobile Television

A fascinating case study in the emerging mobile media, and a spur to thinking about philosophy of telecommunications convergence, can be found in mobile television.

Digital television has been eagerly discussed and anticipated for quite sometime, but “official” mobile television is a comparatively new phenomenon. The thing called mobile television appeared on the scene in various countries in 2004–2005. Its advent came especially through trials, the most publicized of which was Nokia’s partnership with various mobile carriers and television program and channel providers.

My sense is that prior to this time mobile television, as such, was only understood in technical and standards-setting circles. It neither formed part of the policy debates and industry struggles concerning digital television, nor did it form part of the cultural imaginaries of television and media futures. Certainly much policy attention and public discourse centred upon the promise of telecommunications, of which cellular mobile phone had become prominent, but these regimes took some time to engage and invoke the televisual specifically.⁴

Despite this recent emergence, various media players, not least phone companies and equipment manufacturers, have high hopes for mobile television. A November 2006 advertisement for Australia’s Telstra promoting mobile media featured a primary school teacher asking her pupils to tell her what particular images in a book are. She points to what is obviously a mobile phone, and a young boy happily declares it to be a television.

Mobile television is now commercially available in a number of countries. Its diffusion is still in relatively early stages, not only because of the cautiousness of providers but also because of the still nascent state of the technology. Mobile television is still often delivered using the 3G network itself rather than the various standards that allow use of broadcast-

⁴ See Gerard Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture: Mobile Technology in Everyday Life*, London: Routledge, 2006.

ing spectrum to deliver television direct to mobiles (for example, Digital Video Broadcasting – Handheld or DVB-H). One reason for this is that mobile television has become entangled in the wider policy and regulatory debates over spectrum allocation for digital television.⁵

In this dawn of mobile television it is still unclear exactly what it is: that is, what programs are actually shown, how do they compare with other forms of television, who watches them, and what do they make of this experience.

In my own research I have conducted a preliminary list of what is being offered by the four main mobile carriers in Australia. From this limited survey, my conclusion was that there was nothing especially groundbreaking in mobile television up to the end of 2007.⁶ Much of the content available thus far on mobile television in Australia involves reworking, customising, or abbreviating programs well-known from other forms of television, especially free-to-air and subscription television. There has been little made-for-mobile content offered, other than the celebrated examples such as *24 Conspiracy*, offered in Australia by Vodafone. Although I should note that at least one carrier offered some experimental local content.

There do now appear to be developing audiences for mobile television, especially around sporting events, media events, and also the new participative formats associated with *Big Brother*. However, it is fair to say that apart from ritually cited industry studies, mostly laudatory and confirmatory, of mobile television, and some pioneering studies, there is little known internationally about who is actually watching mobile television, where, how, for what ends, and with what significance.

I would suggest that the research agenda should start with the documentation and analysis of the fundamental aspects of this form of mobile media. In doing so, it will also be important to place mobile television in a larger, messier field of developments.

Here I have in mind short videos and films for mobiles, which have been the subject of much innovation and experimentation in artistic and film communities, but have not yet been widely distributed as part of either mobile television or mobile film content.

Mobile television also needs to be discussed in the context of the viewing and consumption of audiovisual content on mobile phones and wireless devices, associated with the new television and internet down-

⁵ For a discussion of mobile television and policy, see Gerard Goggin, “Mobile Digital Television: Dancing with the Stars, or Dancing in the Dark?”, in Andrew Kenyon (ed.), *TV Futures: Digital Television Policy in Australia*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007, pp. 27–53.

⁶ Goggin, “Mobile Digital Television”.

loading cultures. Here we see the fast-growing popularity of the downloading of television programs and videos, from either “official” television sites set up by broadcasters, or from “unofficial” peer-to-peer networks (such as those using Bittorrent and other applications) as well as the viewing of such programs on video iPods, mobiles, laptops, and so on. We might also contrast the slow, jerky development of mobile television with the extraordinary constitution of a new distributed user-producer community of audiovisual material in the form of YouTube and other such websites.

A notable response from the telecommunications carriers has been an embrace of Internet Protocol (IP) as *the* compelling direction in television. In the face of the vertiginous trends in user-driven online cultures, with their fertile matrix on the internet platform, a number of telecommunications carriers are apparently embracing this user turn (currently being figured as Web 2.0, among other labels and logos). Yet this conversion to things internet certainly has its limits, and fits into earlier philosophies of telecommunications convergence, and the images, metaphors, and narratives of which they are composed.

In the first place, the vision for telecommunications convergence that has widely taken shape is about watching media anywhere, anytime, and about user choice and customization of their media experience. The genealogy of this vision is a topic for another occasion, and its politics are well worth discussing, here I simply want to observe that the tableaux of technologies fitting out families to better cope with the rhythms and requirements of their everyday lives is an old dream that stretches back at least to the early days of television itself.

The second observation I would make is that established broadcasters have been pretty slow in responding to the cumulative changes in audience expectations that have come from using technology such as video recorders, personal video recorders, electronic program guides, and now internet downloading of television.

For their part, in entering and seeking to reshape the field of television, the mobile operators have shown, not unexpectedly, a certain path-dependency also, in seeking to extend premium rate content services and mobile portal services by adding mobile television (not least to amortize the sunk capital of 2G and 3G networks). Telecommunications carriers are now investing heavily to transform their circuit-switched networks to IP networks, so I can see a logic in why IP TV might be championed. What I would be interested to find out is whether the operators’ conception of IP TV would deliver the kind of possibilities now actually, if unstably and potentially unsustainably, offered by the internet, and the

new forms of televisual content being developed by its user and producer communities.

The Social Function of Mobile Media

It might be objected that mobile media are still so recent to put into focus, that it is too early to discern what sorts of forms it engenders, and what sorts of audiences will seek it (or vice-versa). And indeed this is a challenge, as my case study of mobile television illustrates. A contrary view, however, is that we might also see an opportunity here, informed by traditions of the social studies of science and technology, to explore a technology, and medium, in the process of becoming, before it is black-boxed and taken-for-granted. Thus we can propose that while still in its infancy, mobile media is an important development with wider cultural, theoretical, and philosophical implications.

For example, those interested in the future of television, and media generally, can no more overlook television's mobile and portable trajectories, than they can wish the internet would settle down. The career of television around the world took certain forms over a roughly fifty to sixty year period from the 1930s through to the early 1990s. It became a central cultural technology in very many countries, associated very closely with particular social and gender arrangements, with leisure practices and popular cultural forms, and with enormous importance for questions of politics, citizenship, and public sphere.

For some time, this settled image of television has been blurred, unfocused, reframed, cut up, and remixed. The digital transformation of television is one prevalent way of approaching these changes. What we need to think about now is how mobile technologies fit into, qualify, modify, and challenge television's digital turn.

In doing so, we will confront important questions of how mobile media is implicated in the development of new cultural forms and genres, social arrangements, and new audiences and publics. These are questions traditionally raised about matters of media and culture, and have not often been posed of telecommunications or even mobile phones.

They have of course been widely discussed in relation to the internet and digital cultures, for instance in the debates about the commons,⁷ or the politics of intellectual property,⁸ or code.⁹ Indeed, many contempo-

⁷ There is a voluminous literature on the commons and the internet, of which two systematic treatments are Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*, New York: Random House, 2001, and Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of*

rary ideas about philosophies of convergence revolve around particular notions of online culture, which are modelled upon internet cultures and technologies. It is often assumed, by extension, that new cultural and media assumptions bound with the internet should be applied to mobile platforms (for instance, a common theme in many discussions involves contrasting the “open” internet with “closed” mobile platforms). This tendency neither does justice to mobiles becoming media, nor to the project of finding an adequate philosophy of convergence.

Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006.

⁸ See, for instance, Kathy Bowrey, *Law and Internet Cultures*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, and Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: How Big Media Uses Technology and the Law to Lock Down Culture and Control Creativity*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

⁹ There is a rich, diverse body of work here, of which a handy conspectus is Joseph Feller et al. (eds.), *Perspectives on Free and Open Source Software*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005. Again, Lessig has successfully opened up this work onto the broad vistas of culture, media, and technology for a general audience with his *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace*, New York: Basic, 1999 (revised as *Code: version 2.0*, New York: Basic, 2006). My point is that while mobiles are often referred to in these discussions, they have not yet been discussed with equal depth or urgency.