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The Domestication of Camera-Phone and MMS Communication

The Early Experiences of Young Italians

Introduction

Digital photography effected with a camera-phone and wireless visual communications conducted for social purposes are renewing aesthetic, experiential, and relational codes, as evidenced by the results of a sociological research project¹ – based on the integration of various non-standard instruments² – on the processes of incorporating new camera-phones in the spatial, temporal, and relational structures of young Italian people's daily experiences.

The research involved 70 male and female participants ranging in age from teenagers to young adults (14 to 34 years old).³ The participants, who were from Milan and the surrounding area, were owners of new mobile devices with colour displays and icon interfaces, built-in or optional cameras, and MMS protocols. The relatively long time-span of the research project⁴ made it possible to observe the progressive familiarization with the new devices and communication practices, and to note the rapid reduction in resistance initially put up by traditional young users.⁵

¹ The research – directed by Fausto Colombo and Barbara Scifo, and carried out by a workgroup of the *Osservatorio sulla Comunicazione* at Università Cattolica in Milan – was financed by Motorola.

² Focus groups (5) and in-depth and non-directional interviews – both individual (21) and natural groups (3 different networks of friends) – supported by audio-visual technology, and socio-linguistic analysis of a sample of photographs taken and sent using camera-phones.

³ The youthful sample was divided into three age cohorts: 14 to 18-year-olds, 19 to 24-year-olds, 25 to 34-year-olds.

⁴ The fieldwork was conducted in two different phases: in June–July 2003 (one year after MMS services were offered by the main Italian telecom providers), and in September–October 2003 (following an increase in the sales of camera-phones and in the use of the new devices).

⁵ For the theoretical framework, the research design, and the main results of the first phase, see Fausto Colombo and Barbara Scifo, “Social Shaping of New Mobile Devices: Representations and Uses among Italian Youth”, in Leslie Haddon et al. (eds.), *The Good*,

Embedding and Localizing the Experience

As compared to a recent sociological debate that emphasizes the notion that an increase in mobility, be it physical or effected via the new technologies, helps to generate processes of disembedding and de-localization of the subjects' experience,⁶ we will try here to illustrate, using empirical evidence of a micro-sociological type, that mobile technology *par excellence*, with its new visual potential, instead emphasizes forms of experience that are strongly rooted in physical and social spaces and shows the subjects' need to embed themselves in localized and socially contextualized forms of interaction.

To this end, we will first concentrate on the social-local context of interaction,⁷ within which subjects use the new technology as a multiple resource in itself and for social contacts. The use of the camera-phone, understood as an opportunity for building up and permanently "wearing" one's own visual identity, seems to us clearly to bear witness to a process of *re-localizing* experience.

We will attempt also to highlight the close relationship existing – in spatially long-distance communication via MMS⁸ – between the physical space or the social situation and the "space of flows"⁹. In particular, we will illustrate two ways this connection can develop.

The first sees the spatial setting and situation in which the subject is located transformed into the content of the communication itself or, in other words, of the virtual co-presence space. In this regard, in the wake of the reflections made by Paddy Scannel¹⁰ regarding radio and television

the Bad and the Irrelevant: The User and the Future of Information and Communication Technologies, Conference Proceedings, Helsinki, 1–3 September 2003, pp. 302–308.

⁶ For a review and critique of some of the major sociological approaches to understanding space and time in relation to mobile technologies, see Nicola Green, "On the Move: Technology, Mobility, and the Mediation of Social Time and Space", *The Information Society* 18 (2002), pp. 281–292.

⁷ For an analysis of the local use of the traditional mobile phone, see Alexandra Weilenmann and Catrine Larsson, "Local Use and Sharing of Mobile Phones", in Barry Brown, Nicola Green and Richard Harper (eds.), *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, London: Springer, 2002, pp. 92–107.

⁸ This association is not characteristic of MMS alone, but in more general terms of all the forms of mobile communications, be it a voice call, SMS, or "beeping".

⁹ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

¹⁰ Paddy Scannel, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

and recently picked up by Shaun Moores¹¹ in a broader context, we can affirm that the camera-phone also seems to enable “the doubling of place” or, more accurately, the *pluralization* of places (and experiences) and their *trans-location*.

The second form of connection between the spatial and situational context in which the interlocutors are located, and the virtual space of flows, is represented by the use of MMS in a manner that is not only representational, but which is based on an actual linguistic resource (just like an SMS or voice call). We will see, however, that the visual codes are not composed of “simple” ideograms, taken completely out of the context of the situation in which the subject is located whilst communicating.

The Camera-Phone within Contexts of Interaction in Physical Settings

When linked to photography, the mobile phone, in itself a personal medium *par excellence*, can represent a new resource for the identity construction of its owner. People, experiences, places, objects, pets: as shown by the visual repertoire of screensavers –

your girlfriend’s face, your longed-for motorbike, at the seaside with your friends, the supporters of your favourite team at the stadium, your dog’s latest litter, your summer holiday T-shirt, the U.S. flag, your best friend...

– one’s everyday world can be stored on the mobile phone’s display.

The practice of photographing using the handset, and the pictures taken and stored in the phone, assume a significance on two different levels of experience: on an individual level, the camera-phone represents a new form of extension of one’s experience and memory, while on the socialization level, it represents a new communication resource that can be invested in one’s peer group and in one’s relationships.

A private and intimate glance at the camera-phone’s “photographic memory” enables users to have their affective world constantly at hand (quite literally so). A photographic archive of memories, a mobile archive; always within easy reach, something to look at again and again, when feeling nostalgic, or just to pass an interstitial moment in one’s daily routine.

Indeed, showing photographs to friends, family, at school, or to colleagues, using them to describe one’s experiences or to share the image of a loved

¹¹ Shaun Moores, “Media, Flows and Places”, *Media@lse*, Electronic Working Papers, London, 2003, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/media@lse/mediaWorkingPapers/ewpNumber6.htm>.

one is a further opportunity for interaction with others, as one of those interviewed stated quite succinctly:

You may run into someone who asks “Do you have a boyfriend?”, “How’s it going?”. Well, I just answer: “I have got all the pictures in here! If you want to look at them, take a seat and I’ll tell you the story of my life.”

Thus, even before sending the photographs to another mobile phone or e-mail address, the user has a portable photo archive that is always ready for sharing with others and for describing his own identity.

That a camera-phone – unlike the traditional mobile phone – can be seen as a social, collective resource in “face-to-face” interaction with one’s peer group is evidenced by other modes of use as well. Not only are camera-phones frequently shared and swapped, thus passing from the owner to someone who does not yet have one and is curious as to its photographic possibilities, but above all, their use represents an opportunity for play and entertainment within a group of peers. An example of this is snapping pictures during moments of fun and games amongst friends. In short, play and sociality are the two primary areas associated with the use of camera-phones by young people.

This is reinforced by those forms of “productive consumption” found above all in adolescents, that is to say, creative modes of image production and editing that can then be invested in social interaction (downloading the image of a mural from the internet, printing it, photographing the print and sending it as birthday greetings to a “graffiti-artist” friend; taking a heart-shaped cushion, superimposing some text on it and photographing it to create a little love-token), not to mention the modification of photographs taken in a traditional manner, exploiting the digital nature of the image and photo-retouching software. Thus it is that actions like adding a facial collage (painting a beard and hair or adding odd spectacles, etc.) to create surprise photographs of classmates and teachers provide teenagers with new opportunities for schoolboy pranks and group cohesion at the moment in which the results are shared (with friends for a laugh, pinning them on a school bulletin board, showing them to the teachers themselves...).

Naturally, for young males, taking pictures of girls is something to be expected; a voyeuristic act and a trophy to share as part of male social bonding. However, other and more polite forms can be thought up, such as asking a girl for permission to take a snapshot and using this as an excuse to start a conversation, thus transforming the camera-phone into a new resource for interaction with the opposite sex.

Finally, once recorded, photos (such as pictures of motorbikes, cars, etc. seen on the road or in magazines) become objects of exchange in a context of physical proximity (even more so than in remote contexts), just as with other ordinary virtual or material forms of exchange that can be found in the teenage world (swapping logos, ring-tones, music, magazines, cartoons, video games, figurines, stickers, etc.). It is interesting to observe that some (typically male) users are using bluetooth technology (for instance from one classroom to another) or infrared capabilities (if in closer physical proximity) to transfer visual data from one mobile device to another, aware of the financial savings to be made compared to sending an MMS message, and the increased speed of exchange. This is another form of “resistance”, as with the “squillini” (short rings, a practice by which teens signal reciprocal interest), which circumvents the service providers but fulfils all communication wishes in full.

Thus, the camera-phone is not only an increasingly personal technology (being deeply set within the subject, his or her universe and relationships) but also a collective technology, a resource for “face-to-face” sociality, entertainment, and communicative exchanges within contexts of local interaction and principally within a group of peers.

MMS and Contexts of Remote Interaction

Taking photographs with a camera-phone seems to be establishing itself in a natural manner that is full of potential for the processes of constructing identity and of socialization among young users. The MMS message, as a form of distant simultaneous visual communication, seems however to be slower in gaining popularity (one need only recall the cumbersome configuration typically needed in the first phase of the service’s launch by operators, the high cost, the small number of owners of MMS-capable phones, etc.). Nevertheless, research shows how, notwithstanding the number of MMS messages that are being exchanged at present between those starting to use this new process of communication, there are already clear signals concerning the spread of a precise culture of communication and the birth of a new language.

In the first place, the experiences associated with this new form of communication all seem to be positive, as this is a practice connoted as something playful, emotional, associated with social occasions, and with playful and special moments.

Moreover, communicating through images is closely and almost exclusively linked to one’s network of strong relationships (friends from the same gang, intimate and/or long-standing friendships, girlfriends/boyfriends or

wives/husbands, brothers, and to a slightly lesser extent, colleagues and schoolmates). The outcome is an evident reassertion of the mobile phone's cultural identity as a medium that makes it possible to intensify communication with proximate relations, to nourish sentimental bonds, and to build a shared code of experience interpretation, as one of our interviewees explained clearly:

for there are experiences that you had together, in the past... I think you can understand them better. So it's definitely much nicer to get a message from them. It's nice to get it from other people too, but with them there's something more, that has to do with friendship. When I get a message from them, I understand what's behind it, too.

This experience communicated via MMS is also mentioned by interviewees in comparisons between the intimacy of the photographic process and the intimacy of the picture exchange –

I really like receiving MMS messages because it gives me the idea that they want me to be part of their emotions, because, I mean, when you take a picture, something inside you tinkles, it's something you particularly like, a situation, the atmosphere, so it is something special...

– and this makes it possible to interpret the visual exchange as an act of confidence and trust. From this point, the step to interpreting an MMS message as a gift – as already occurs with SMS messages¹² – is small: “*It's really like a small present*”.

Let us take a closer look at the actual situations in which MMS messages are sent and received, their content, and their meaning.

Usually, sending an MMS message is meant to give access to and to share the place in which the subject is, or his private sphere. In the first case, when it is a place that is to be communicated, MMS seems to act as a form of testimony and authentication of one's presence in a certain physical space –

it's common among young people, you say: “Look, there she is! And here I am!”, you are hanging around and ask “where are you?”, “I'm here with

¹² Alexander Taylor and Richard Harper, “The Gift of the Gab?: A Design Oriented Sociology of Young People's Use of ‘mobilZe!’”, *Journal of Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (CSCW), vol. 12, no. 3 (2001), pp. 267–296, cf. <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/dwrc/Publications/GiftOfTheGab.pdf>.

the other guys”, “is it a nice place?”, “yes it is, I can show it to you”.

– and a tool for sharing that very same space and objects that may be there –

I went to a fair in Germany, in March, and I took pictures of what I could see, and sent them to my friends; If a friend tells me about something that he is watching, I can tell him “show it to me”.

In this sense, MMS is used for witnessing and describing. When it is the (individual and social) situations and emotions that one wishes to share instead, the intended aims can be many, although related. By sending an MMS message, the user aims to narrate what he is doing and experiencing right then, right there:

the picture you take while you're dressing and diving, and then you send it by MMS, it's fantastic! It's fun! ... My friends are performing in a club; they take a picture and send it to me; they're sending me an idea of what I'm doing.

Or one might be trying to include absent friends in a face-to-face social interaction:

when she's working at the hospital, when she's on duty in the afternoon, in the evening, or at night, and I go out with my friends and she's not there with us because she's working, I can take a picture of my friends and send it to her, so she can join us in some way.

Often this inclusional aim is joined by a wish to make fun of each other, teasing those who are not right there:

I happened, last winter, to go skiing on a Thursday morning, and I sent an MMS message to friends who were not there: “Hi! eat your heart out, we are skiing!”; I took a picture of the stadium while watching the match and sent it to him, it was an ironic gesture, a way of saying “I am here having fun, and you are not”.

It may be also that an MMS message represents the only way to gain access to a displaced experience and share it: a way to extend experience, as in the case of a birth of a son. As one young father told us:

More than just the beauty of that moment [the birth of a son], it was the possibility to show something that you could not see otherwise: it was either by MMS or nothing, for you could not enter the delivery room, only the mother and father had access to it.

In general, beyond the exceptional nature of the situation mentioned above, whenever it is a case of one's private life (objects, relatives, favourite places...) forming the object of the exchange of communications, MMS enables young people to bring the other person into their own world, especially the domestic world, i.e. a sphere that often cannot be shared otherwise:

they let me see the car they had... all pictures that introduced me to the rest of the family and to things they had at home; for example, I took some pictures of my flat here in Milan. Since I come from Sardinia I sent them to a couple of old friends I have there to show them how my flat looked like, and stuff like that.

Equally significant is the possibility, created by the exchange of photographs of loved ones or friends, of sharing one's social network, creating connections among the different relational spheres the subjects belong to –

then I showed them my girlfriend because they didn't know her ... or my friends... Quite often they don't know each other personally, they may have seen each other via MMS, so they get to see each other, "right, that's him", just out of curiosity

– or encouraging new encounters through the virtual representation of an other, most typically, someone of the opposite sex:

I also happen to send pics of people who don't have a girlfriend: "I must introduce you to this guy, he's a friend of mine".

In this sense, the camera-phone represents a resource not only for the maintenance of different people's social networks (or in Barry Wellman's words, a resource for the maintenance of "networked individualism"¹³), but also for their potential union and overlap.¹⁴

¹³ Barry Wellman, "Little Boxes, Glocalization, and Networked Individualism", in Makoto Tanabe, Peter van den Besselaar and Toru Ishida (eds.), *Digital Cities II: Computational and Sociological Approaches*, Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2002.

From what has been said so far, it is clear how the experience of visual communication is closely linked to the search for a spatio-temporal embedding of subjects and experience, favouring the local context and social situations of which the exchange of communications itself forms a part. Thus it is that the remote, simultaneous visual communication among young people is becoming a way for them to take hold of the experience and world of others:

for instance, the emotion of having a child, I think that... of course he is the father, but I saw them too; the opportunity to see places I could not see, for I was elsewhere...

MMS messages are thus seen and interpreted as a way to extend and multiply experience.

MMS: A New Linguistic Resource

We have seen how the first forms of incorporating MMS act in terms of representation, witnessing, and narrative. Finally, we will consider the cases in which MMS is used as a true linguistic resource: in this sense, MMS can serve as a rapid, effective form of communication in the place of an SMS message or telephone call. In comparison with traditional forms of telephone communications, MMS messages are considered – especially by our youngest interviewees – to be convenient and quick to produce (just frame the shot and press a button, rather than have to spend time clicking on the touchpad as in the case of SMS messages), effective in terms of interpretation (because they overcome any form of semantic ambiguity found in the spoken or written word), succinct, and reducing the risk of being kept hanging on the telephone.

Within this context, it is possible to distinguish three types of visual messages: *performative* MMS messages, i.e., photo messages employed as a resource to generate an act; *informative* MMS messages, i.e., visual communication dominated by an informative function; *problem-solving* MMS messages, i.e., instrumental, pragmatic photos, taken in order to reduce time and costs, or to solve emergencies.

In the first case, the message is effective in generating the desired result

¹⁴ For a critique of sociological positions that argue how mobile communication and the internet are “rendering society into pieces”, see Richard Harper, “Are Mobiles Good or Bad for Society?” in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003.

(most typically in order to micro-coordinate a group), and in increasing efficiency (e.g. regarding the promptness of the requested action). In fact, sending an image of a place to which the recipient of the image should immediately go, or taking a picture showing yourself having lunch at a certain bar, so that if someone wants to join you, that is the place he should head to; or again, taking a picture of your empty glass urging your friends to bring some water (as you can't leave your place) or taking a picture of your watch, so as to suggest it's high time you went home, are all examples of performative visual messages. Moreover, the use of text in these is either minimal, to frame the image (rather than to comment on it), or completely absent, because the interpretative codes of the image are shared and negotiated within the group.

In the second type of message (which we have here labelled as *informative*), we also find a reduction in the use of verbal codes, but in this case visual communication is linked to the intention of sending a simple message: for example, letting friends know that you and your old boyfriend have just started seeing each other again, by taking a picture of the two of you together, or communicating that you had a road accident by showing your damaged motorbike; or again, letting people know you are extremely tired by showing them a close-up photo of your exhausted eyes, or perhaps letting people know you have managed to find tickets for a concert by taking a picture of the concert venue. These examples are very different in terms of content, but they all share the same use of visual code.

Finally, there is what we have defined as *problem-solving* MMS messages, associated with resolving given situations according to context and subject; thus, within the school and university context, this type of MMS message could involve the reproduction of math formulas or of pages from books so as to use them secretly while taking a written examination; or in a shop or fair, visually recording objects and goods so as to share them with a partner or a friend in order to ask what they think before actually buying anything; or again supplying documentary evidence to the garage or to the insurance company for a road accident damage appraisal.

Overall, what emerges from the type of message described in this last paragraph is that MMS represents not only a playful and socializing technology, but also a technology enabling action, information, co-ordination, and emergency management.

Moreover, on top of the functional and situational differences we have noted thus far in putting together an initial provisional classification of the uses of MMS as an iconic linguistic form, it is apparently clear from early use that what we have here is a language that is deeply set in the sub-

ject action context: not only because the exchange of MMS messages is linked to the remote, simultaneous sharing of the “sense of place” (as we have tried to illustrate in the preceding paragraph and which, moreover, is in tune with the advertising campaigns from the first phase of the service’s launch), but above all because when all the users model this technology as a resource for real action (and not just for the exchange of ideograms or symbol icons, as suggested by another advertising campaign¹⁵), this can only be localized in the space and time of the experience of the subjects and in the network of their relations.

Conclusions

In summary, our research serves to help us understand how young people are rapidly and creatively appropriating new mobile technologies. It shows how, even in its latest form, the mobile telephone is bringing about a further redefinition of the “situational geography” of social life.¹⁶ The results demonstrate that the camera-phone enables the multiplication of connections between different physical and social spaces rather than the weakening of a “sense of place”. Its use seems to respond to a need on the part of users to embed their social relations within a context, and a need to appropriate their social spaces visually – even though mobile communication is often cited as contributing to the processes of disembedding experience from local contexts, as well as the individualization and fragmentation of social relations. From this last point of view as well, the research seems to show how the new types of techno-social situations introduced by the forms of use of camera-phones (which are in reality closer to the preceding ones than they seem) reveal opportunities at a micro-social level for forms of spatio-temporal and social continuity supporting proximity and the sharing of experience.

¹⁵ This refers to an Italian advertising campaign for a camera-phone in which the display shows a football accompanied by the words “It’s me or it”, without visually referring to any element – person, physical or situational setting – in which the subject is located.

¹⁶ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.