

The papers in this volume are edited versions of the talks given at the conference *The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication: Places, Images, People, Connections*, held on 10–12 June 2004 in Budapest. It was the seventh conference, and the fourth international one, within the framework of the “Communications in the 21st Century” project, a joint interdisciplinary social science project of T-Mobile Hungary (formerly Westel Mobile Telecommunications) and the Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.<sup>1</sup> The project was initiated by Westel Mobile, and launched in January 2001. The management of Westel Mobile had an idea that mobile telephony was probably more than just the next major step in the technology of telecommunications; that it was a *humane* technology, capable of making the world a better place. They decided to explore this idea, and chose the Institute for Philosophical Research as their research partner. The Institute was selected because it had acquired a reputation, on the one hand, of being interested in the history of communication technologies from a philosophical point of view, indeed of regarding communication as the paramount philosophical problem, and, on the other hand, of rejecting facile techno-pessimism. It appears the choice was a felicitous one. Looking back upon the past four years, I venture to say that in the course of our collaboration the credibility of C. P. Snow’s “two cultures” thesis had rapidly melted away; there emerged no real tensions between the technologically-minded approach of the telecommunications engineer, and the philosophically-minded approach of the humanities scholar. Furthermore, the thesis that mobile telephony alleviates, rather than enhances, the alienation modern communications technologies gave rise to seems to have been fully vindicated. But let me emphasize, also, that the success of this collaboration owes a great deal to the personal makeup of T-Mobile Hungary’s management, above all to CEO András Sugár: to his interest, guidance, and empathy.

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<sup>1</sup> For a regularly updated overview of the project see the website <http://21st.century.phil-inst.hu>.

To date, the project has generated seven published volumes altogether: three in Hungarian,<sup>2</sup> one in German,<sup>3</sup> and three in English.<sup>4</sup> These volumes have not been without impact; they are recognized items in the list of scholarly and scientific publications that worldwide social science research on mobile telephony has produced in the past few years. When we set out early in 2001, there were very few such publications; and the various research centres – most of them, I am happy to say, represented at the 2004 Budapest conference – were rather less visible than they are today. As a result, our own research proceeded in a variety of directions in the beginning, trying to take stock, as it were, of the range of issues demanding attention. By the end of 2002, we realized that a kind of division of labour has become possible. Since then our focus has been, increasingly, on cognitive science, linguistics, and of course philosophy, while the focus on sociology, economics, and even political science, has become less pronounced.

The 2004 conference was a direct continuation of the one held in April 2003. In the discussions during the earlier event, two major unresolved issues became conspicuous. First, the issue of MMS, *multimedia messaging*, which as a full-fledged service was very new at the time, with T-Mobile, as it were, playing a pioneering role in its introduction. By mid-2003 it became clear that Hungarian users were slower in developing enthusiasm for sending MMS messages than had been expected either by T-Mobile or our research team. In June 2003, the decision was made, supported in particular by György G. Németh, T-Mobile Hungary's Executive Director of Communications, that we should insert a concentrated research period focussing on the philosophy and psychology of MMS acceptance. A dozen Nokia 3650s were distributed among the research team members. The design of our experiment was different from that of Ilpo Koskinen's, as described in his book *Mobile Image* and in his paper in the present vol-

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<sup>2</sup> Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobil információs társadalom: Tanulmányok* [The Mobile Information Society: Essays], Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Kutatóintézete, 2001; Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *A 21. századi kommunikáció új útjai: Tanulmányok* [New Perspectives on 21st-Century Communications: Essays], Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Kutatóintézete, 2001; Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobilközösség – mobilmegismerés: Tanulmányok* [Mobile Communities – Mobile Cognition: Essays], Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Kutatóintézete, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Allzeit zuhanden: Gemeinschaft und Erkenntnis im Mobilzeitalter*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003; Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Learning: Essays on Philosophy, Psychology and Education*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003; Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2003.

ume, where he gave phones to groups with various compositions, taking account of gender difference and, say, the city/countryside axis; it was also different from the design of Rich Ling's and Tom Julsrud's experiment, described in their paper, in which phones were distributed to three different professional groups, namely a team of travelling salespeople for a soft-drink company, a group of real-estate agents, and a team of carpenters. Koskinen, Ling and Julsrud distilled theoretical insights from the practices of non-theorists; our design was to provide some grown-up, intelligent intellectuals with the devices, create conditions where they will have to use them regularly, and hope for some theory to be forthcoming. The results we arrived at in part overlap with the conclusions of the Ling and Julsrud experiment: we found that *poor visual culture* was the main reason behind people's reluctance to make use of their phones' MMS capabilities. However, our results are not without surprises, in that they point to long-term historical processes not usually taken into consideration in this context. The poor visual culture of our contemporaries, we believe, is the consequence of many centuries of a literacy almost exclusively alphabetic; a consequence in this volume spelled out by a member of our team, Zsuzsanna Kondor. It will take not months or years, but many decades, for images to achieve the cultural status that, from the point of view of anthropology and cognitive psychology, they no doubt deserve.

The second unresolved issue that had become conspicuous at the conference in April 2003 was that of *placelessness* – an issue which has been around since the mid-1980s, but which now appears to have gained new significance. Manuel Castells' formula, according to which in the network age the “space of places” is being substituted by a “space of flows”, plays a prominent role in his 1996–1998 trilogy *The Information Age*; it is, however, an earlier coinage of his, and has been often and widely quoted – for example by Raimondo Strassoldo in the volume *Globalization and Territorial Identities*, published in 1992. The references are usually to Castells' 1989 book *The Informational City*; but the formula is there, already, in the latter's 1985 paper “High Technology, Economic Restructuring, and the Urban-Regional Process in the United States”.<sup>5</sup> And 1985 is also the year when the book *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* by Joshua Meyrowitz appeared. Meyrowitz gave the concluding talk at the April 2003 conference; it was in the discussion following his talk that we became aware of the need to tackle the new sense of placelessness emerging as a consequence of mobile telephony. That mobile phone users

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<sup>5</sup> In Manuel Castells (ed.), *High Technology, Space, and Society*, Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE: 1985.

in public places do not seem to have a sense of place, is, as a rule, irritating; that mobile communication leads to a virtual temporary merging of different physical places is often found frustrating; while the possibility of communicating globally from anywhere to anywhere without even having to realize which place we are at and which place the others are at is liberating, to say the least. But mobile telephony is of course at all times entirely bound up with real places. At a pedestrian level, let us recall that it is based on a cellular system of transmission towers, totally dependent on concrete locations. At a more elevated level, we should note that most mobile calls and SMS messages are domestic, and are in fact connected to some local situation. In the city, in towns, in our homes, arriving at the garage door... Social science focussing on mobile communication increasingly recognizes that the mobile telephone is not only a revolutionary instrument that connects us globally, it is also a powerful tool for connections on a more local scale: an organizer of life in small spaces and communities. It appears, then, that the use of mobile phones does indeed involve a sense of place.

At the conference *The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication*, sixteen plenary speakers gave talks, starting with Joshua Meyrowitz and concluding with James Katz. Some thirty-five talks were given in the parallel sessions. Many of the talks have found their way into the present volume. However, the pattern made up by the chapters here is different from that of the talks at the conference.

With a topic like this, it is natural – and to be celebrated – that, in many of the chapters, a great number of bibliographical references cited are actually webpages. Of course webpages can vanish; so it has become customary over the past few years for authors to indicate the date when they last accessed the site they quote. In the present volume, this convention has not been followed. Rather, each internet reference has been checked by the editor; all internet references contained in the volume were valid at the time the material went to press, i.e. March 2005.