

Introduction

Humphrey's 2005 article, *Cellphones in public: social interactions in a wireless era* explores people's cellphone use in public spaces and the social implications for the new technology. Today, however, cellphones have evolved into much more than mobile calling devices. People use their phones to text, check various social media sites, take pictures both on the camera feature and using Snapchat, read, and play games. Drawing on Goffman's (1963) concept of cross talk and Hopper's (1992) framework for caller hegemony, Humphreys (2005) explored society adjusted to the new mobile technology.

Many of Humphreys' (2005) findings exemplifying the social repercussions of cellphone use in public spaces were still observed today, with a few exceptions of stark contrast. However, the main difference is how much more mobile devices are capable of and the shift from a device used for remote voice calls to a device used for so much more. Although people today use cellphones in very different ways, many of the behaviors she observed still occur, demonstrating a consistency in societal norms over and explaining shifts in societal views.

Methods

Over the course of a month and a half, I collected data through observational research on Cornell University's campus and intercept interviews in New York City, Ithaca, New York, and Miami, Florida to determine how people use and respond to others' cellphone use in public spaces. The observations aimed to determine how people use cellphones in public spaces while the interviews were conducted to gain a sense of societal norms and an understanding of how people perceive their own and other's cellphone uses across various public spaces.

More specifically, the observations were conducted in libraries, cafés, social events, campus building atriums, and restaurants near Cornell's campus. Libraries were chosen because these are generally considered places where loud speaking or cellphone use is unacceptable. Social events, on the other hand, afford the complete opposite social norm of a library. Speaking is not only accepted, but it would be considering socially rude to not speak. Restaurants and cafés exhibit behaviors somewhere in between libraries and social events. These locations were chosen in an attempt to collect a range of behaviors in order to best compare the actions observed to how interview participants described cell phone use in their lives.

A total of ten hours of observational data were collected over the course of the study. The hours of collection were purposefully chosen in an attempt to gain the most representative data at any given collection time. Most observations lasted for one to two hours; however, shorter observations were conducted on occasion where an interesting insight was noted, leading to more detailed notes regarding the situation. These situations mainly resulted from an interaction at a social event or a conversation overheard in a café.

In her article, Humphreys asserts that technology use is a reflection of societal norms, rather than technology shaping society, arguing that "by focusing only on the effects of technology one can misunderstand the greater social and cultural context that it reflects" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 811). The intercept interviews allowed me to determine what these societal norms are and how deeply people care about each. The interviews were conducted in parks, Cornell buildings, eateries, and an airport. I approached five unique people in these locations and each participant volunteered his or her time to answering my questions. The

participants ranged in age from 20 to 82 years old, both male and female. Four of the participants were from the Northeast United States while one grew up in Germany but was interviewed in the Miami, Florida airport.

Cross talk

Cross talk occurs when one member of a dyad engages in conversation with a third person, without including their original conversational partner in the interaction (Humphreys, 2005). Humphreys found that cross talk is analogous to a third person approaching one member of a dyad in a restaurant and that individual not introducing the two people to one another (Humphreys, 2005). During the time of her study, cellphones were nearly exclusively used to make phone calls while not at home. However, as previously mentioned, cellphone use today encompasses much more than simply calling from anywhere. More so, I observed only one phone call throughout my observations, and most cases of cross talk involved one member of a dyad or group using a cellphone to text while the other(s) attempted to either regain that person's attention or engage in another behavior to appear occupied to onlookers.

When the only means of communication were landlines, people would answer the phone no matter what activity they were engaged in, whether that be a heated argument or cooking dinner (Humphreys, 2005). The advent of the answering machine changed this norm (Humphreys, 2005). Now people did not have to choose between knowing who is calling and continuing about their day. Texting provides a unique comparison to voicemail technology. On the surface, the two seem to be similar: one responds to a message if and when they have the time to do so. However, what I observed is that "...the face-to-face encounter is superseded by the mediated interruption of the summoning telephone" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 822).

These feelings lead to people engaging in defense mechanisms, any behavior that “...act[s] as involvement shields against intrusion from others” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 814). The two member of the original conversation are both considered ‘Withs,’ since they are together in the public setting. When one of the Withs engages in cross talk, the partner becomes a ‘Single,’ someone who is alone in a public space. Singles are generally treated differently than Withs in public, often “judged more harshly” and “potentially seen as not having friends nor being sociable” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 813). This harshness held particularly true for one participants who expressed:

Interviewer: So if you were with someone who received a cellphone call, can you describe to me what you would do?

P5: Maybe I’d just get on my phone. Just to show that I have friends too.

By using his phone, the respondent directly confirms this social fear articulated by Humphreys. When one With engages with his or her phone, their conversational partner becomes a Single and is thus exposed to the judgments associated with being one. The participant’s phone use acts as a defense mechanism such social undesirability. One of Humphreys’ participants described using a defense mechanism because “[She’d] feel kinda silly just standing around” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 816). Similar to Humphreys’ findings, when a With engaged in cross talk, the new Single would engage in a defense mechanism. Interestingly, interview participants, such as the one above, expressed also using their phone if their

companion were; however, I observed many resorting to the same behaviors found in 2005. For example:

A girl has her computer in front of her in a café and is scrolling through her phone while the boy sits next to her appearing anxious as he looks around, fidgets, and looks at her waiting for her to look up from the phone.

In this situation, the boy does not also take out his mobile phone and engage with it; rather, he looks around trying to find something else to occupy himself with while he waits. Intriguingly, the boy later rises angrily and takes his phone out appearing to send a message to a friend. This is another defensive behavior slightly different from that observed in 2005, where the individual uses his phone to seemingly express his anger to a friend, without his companion seeing the message. Additionally, people were observed using their phones as a defense mechanism, like articulated in the interview excerpt earlier:

Gray skirt girl looks around trying to find someone else to speak to, but sees that there is nobody near. She then takes out her phone and the two sit in the same spots, but now both on their phones. She looks disappointed by the contents of her device. Gray skirt girl lowers the phone down but quickly raises it back up and scrolls through something.

The phone in this case represents a completely new form on defense mechanisms. In 2005, one would not be able to scroll through a device while out at a social event. The

difference in technology allows for the same desired defensive behavior to be achieved, where previously a defensive behavior in this situation, such as looking out the window, would have more obviously exposed the Single.

Defense mechanisms also occur when an individual arrives at a location alone, with no intention to ever become a With. In 2005, Singles would often attempt to seem occupied through reading, using it as a defense mechanism against being seen as a Single in a public space. Again, the desire to avoid appearing vulnerable in a public space remains the same, but the form of defensive behavior shifted from mostly non-mobile to extensive mobile phone use. For example:

A boy sitting alone in shorts and a sweatshirt in a café with his phone on the counter in front of him as he appears to be scrolling on his screen. He pauses, looks at something on the screen for a moment, then continues scrolling. There is nothing else in front of him besides his phone and cup of water. He pauses the scrolling action again and looks at something on screen. His order is ready and he rises to get it from the front counter.

Situations similar to this where individuals use their cellphones as a means of seeming occupied were observed in every location. Such a finding was arguably observed in 2005. People read a newspaper or magazine while alone in a public space. However, the interesting difference is the means by which the reading is occurring. The advancement in cellphone capabilities changes the way people consume media and eases defensive capabilities. Prior to

such advancements, if an individual forgot to bring a book or purchase a newspaper on their way to a café, they could be left waiting alone, looking around, defenseless to the Single vulnerabilities.

Listening in

As previously mentioned, technology is a reflection of societal norms. Cross talk now occurs more with texting than phone calls, but individuals expressed the same “put off” sentiments as those to Humphrey’s participants when a conversational partner engages in phone use (Humphreys, 2005).

Interviewer: Can you describe to me how you would feel if you were out with a friend and they spent the entire time texting or scrolling through their cellphone?

P1: Uh, I’d get really annoyed [nervous laughter]

P3: They would not be a friend of mine because I do not have friends who would text message or scroll through the phone when they are out with me.

P4: I would be so angry! I have two best friends and one of them does that so often!

Her phone is always on the table when we are in the bar or something...

Growing up, individuals are taught not to eavesdrop on others, but when a conversational partner engages in vocal cross talk, it can be nearly impossible not to listen in. Humphreys found this to be extraordinarily true in her research with one participant admitting that she, “listen[s] intently to see what they’re talking about” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 818). She also noticed that people tend to create a form of private space while speaking on the phone,

leaning their heads down and turning their bodies slightly (Humphreys, 2005). This posture gives the illusion that the call is more private than it actually is and people show a similar behavior while texting, often holding the mobile phone closer to their bodies when the conversation is more private.

When a With engages in texting, the new Single often feels left out, hence engaging in eavesdropping in an attempt to be included (Humphreys, 2005). It is significantly more difficult, though, to eavesdrop on someone's text message conversation, which is why I observed many dyadic cross talk encounters similar to this interaction which took place at a social event:

Red skirt girl then continues scrolling through her phone as gray skirt girl tries to look at what she is doing. Red skirt girl re-orientes her body so that gray skirt girl cannot see the screen.

The girl in the gray skirt clearly wants to be part of the conversation red skirt girl is engaging with on her phone, but she cannot simply eavesdrop without red skirt girl knowing like in 2005. Rather, she must make an active attempt to view the screen in hopes that the girl in the red skirt would like her to take part in the engagement. By turning and re-orienting her body away from the girl in the gray skirt, the girl in the red skirt is symbolizing that she does not wish to share the interaction and creates a more private space, similar to the position observed by Humphreys (2005) while someone is speaking on the phone.

Although this observation gives the illusion that texting is more private than voice calls, it could be the case for only the message receiver. Unknowingly to the sender, texts can be

viewed by others and sent to others both physically and emotionally close to the receiver.

Those interviewed were not asked about this privacy nor did it arise in my conversations with them, an idea which will be explored further in the limitations section.

Dual front interaction

During a verbal cross talk interaction, the Single has the ability to communicate with their conversation partner both verbally and non-verbally, known as dual-front interaction (Humphreys, 2005). The interactions allow for either person—on or off the phone—to communicate to the other without the individual on the other end of the call knowing (Humphreys, 2005). Humphreys observed that it was often the person not on the phone verbally communicating to and receiving and non-verbal response from the partner engaged in the call. The exact behavior was observed in my fieldwork as well, but once again, the individual engaged in cross talk was texting rather than on a call. As I observed: She keeps talking to red skirt girl as if nothing has changed. Red skirt girl still does not look up from her phone but nods along as gray skirt girl speaks to her.

The main difference between the actions observed by Humphreys (2005) and mine are that the individual occupied with texting cannot see the actions of the person speaking. Essentially, if the Single were to gesture to the texting cross-talker, he would be met with silence because in order to text one must look down at the phone. On a call, the Single might gesture in an attempt not to interrupt the phone conversation or ensure the person on the other end of the call remains ignorant of the Single's presence, but this luxury of communication choice is lost with texting advances; the Single must solely interact in a verbal

manner. Even with this verbal interaction, however, it is not guaranteed that the cross talker will respond. As I observed one couple:

After about 4 minutes she puts the phone down and looks up at boy with glasses.

They exchange words that I am not close enough to understand but can hear the

hasty tone. He then loudly asks her if she wants to sit outside, she ignores him

looking back at her phone. Boy with glasses asks her three more times before she

finally answers.

Unlike on a voice call where one may not be able to listen to both his conversational partner and the cross talk partner at the same time, someone texting has the advantage of listening to the With because texting requires reading not listening. This interaction demonstrates that ability does not necessarily equate to action. In other words, people appear to be so engrossed in what is happening with the phone conversation, despite it being non-verbal and able to be answered at any time, that they chose to remove themselves from the real-time interaction occurring with the conversational partner. On a voice call, the two speakers must answer each other immediately or the interaction fails. While this is objectively untrue for texting, my observations demonstrate that people treat the behavior in the same way as they do a voice call. This could potentially stem from society being used to voice interactions and mimicking that societal norm or immediate response with their texts.

Three-way Interactions

There are instances, though, of Withs engaging Singles in the cross talk conversation. This is known as three-way interaction (Humphreys, 2005). Again, Humphreys' (2005) findings showed this occurring solely in voice calls because phone capabilities were less apt at that time. My findings indicated three-way interaction occurring when two people engage with content on one of the individual's phones, usually through picture taking. One interview participant described how he gains a cellphone user's attention through taking the phone and creating a three-way interaction:

Interviewer: So what if the person wasn't paying attention to you and you wanted to talk to them but they were just scrolling, what would you do?

P5: Maybe they'd put it down. I don't know if you'd get the whole away thing. One thing I like to do when someone's on their phone and just being on their phone is just taking their phone and just sending SnapChats from it because that gives us something to engage with because: 1. I'm on their phone, and 2. I'm taking pictures on their phone, usually not just normal pictures, sometimes with faces that are talkable about and so it gives us a conversation starter and it gives us a valuable memory on their phone that maybe their friends could see too!

While I was not able to observe any such behavior taking place in the field, this individual's description exemplifies a defense mechanism being used to create a three-way interaction. By taking the phone and using it, he provides the user with content they can share

and discuss together, and he creates a potential three-way interaction for the user in the future through providing a picture to show another friend later.

Humphreys notes that the three-way “...interaction is dependent on the cellphone user” (Humphreys, 2005, p. 821). The interview participant’s explanation involved his taking control of the situation, a stark contrast to Humphrey’s observation. However, the interactions I observed in the field paralleled her analysis:

The two are sitting in front of a window. A man walks behind the window and looks in at the two girl and says hi. He appears to know them. Red skirt girl lifts her phone and invites gray skirt girl into the SnapChat (she vocally indicates that they should take a SnapChat—see image below). They take the SnapChat and gray skirt girl looks over red skirt girl’s shoulder and she sends the SnapChat to people.



The girl in the red skirt must invite the girl in the gray skirt to be part of the SnapChat interaction. As the cellphone user, “red skirt girl” has all of the power. Without the invitation,

the girl in the gray skirt would continue to be a Single and potentially try to be in the picture, but ultimately the girl in the red skirt must allow it as she has control over the device.

Caller Hegemony

The first main difference between Humphreys' (2005) findings and my own is in regards to caller ID, both in terms of privacy and call screening. Caller hegemony, or the unequal power dynamic of a caller and an answer, has drastically changed since Humphreys' study (Humphreys, 2005). Due to technological advancement, caller ID is now a standard feature on every cellphone. Furthermore, most phones today are considered "smart phones" and no longer flip open. This evolution in the technology means that people no longer have the option of choosing whether or not to check the caller ID because the name of the caller (if he is she is in the receiver's contact book) or the lack thereof (if the receiver does not know the caller's phone number) automatically appears on the screen, making it nearly impossible to not view it before answering or declining the call. Earlier cellphones models afforded choice between flipping the phone open to answer the call or waiting to view who the caller was prior to answering.

Furthermore, Humphreys (2005) details the societal concerns of call receivers knowing who is calling. She explains, "Prior to answering the call, the answerer can see either the name of the caller, the phone number from which they are calling, or 'Caller ID unavailable' if the caller has signed up proactively to have his identification information blocked" (Humphreys, 2005, p. 823). This was alarming to people when caller ID first became standard on cellphones. Society considered it an invasion of caller privacy to have a name or number publically available, and in 2005, when receiving a call from an unknown number "...most respondents

indicated that they would answer the phone” and “...were not proud that they use caller ID”

(Humphreys, 2005, p. 824, 825). Contrary, the participants in my research explained the complete opposite privacy concern in that each person articulated how they would not answer a call from an unknown number. One individual described a major problem with unknown numbers calling him:

Interviewer: Can you describe to me how you use the caller ID function on your cellphone?

P3: Absolutely. If I don't know who's calling me and it comes up from an area code out of the area, out of the state...out of my area, and it, I usually get many advertisements that way or people wanting information or for me to buy something, I don't answer.

For this participant, only numbers without a caller ID are skeptical because he wonders what business they have calling him or how they came about his phone number. Interestingly, this participant is 82 years old, which demonstrates the shift in societal thought rather than a potential generational observation.

Additionally, texting, like caller ID, allows the recipient to view who is contacting him and decide whether or not to respond, thus disrupting the idea that the caller has all the power in a situation. With texting the default setting is similar to a voicemail setting in that the person does not know if one is available or not. Read receipts interrupt this social norm because the caller knows if one viewed the message. Interview participants generally did not have the read

receipt feature turned on because they enjoy having the power over the conversation. One participant explained, (P1) “I don’t like when people [laughs] can see if I’ve read a message, especially if I’m not responding right away.”

This respondent unknowing directly refers to the caller/answerer power dynamic. She can respond at her leisure, leveling the one-sided interactions of the voice calls articulated in past research. The same participant noted that she does enjoy when the people she is texting have read receipt turned on because she likes to see if they are ignoring her messages. This again relates to the desire for people to have the power in the interaction.

Conclusions

The research conducted explored how people of 2016 use cellphones in public spaces and compares such use to Humphreys’ (2005) original findings. In her article, Humphreys articulated how technology use is a reflection of societal norms rather than technology creating new ways of interacting. Using this framework, I presented comparisons to the concepts of cross talk, listening in, dual front interaction, three-way interaction, and caller hegemony from Humphreys’ (2005) study to individuals today. Many of the findings were consistent with the 2005 results, with a shift in how people engaged in the behaviors rather than a shift in type of behavior. Caller hegemony, however, presented distinct differences between the two studies. Today, the power lies more with the receiver than with the caller or texter due to advances in caller ID and the prevalence of texting today.

One major limitation of this study was asking participants about how they respond to voice calls rather than someone summoning them via text message. Given that I only observed one voice call throughout my research, it would seem more appropriate to gain insight on

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people's views of a partner receiving and answering a text while out to lunch, for example, rather than a phone call. Future studies should explore this and the implications it has on caller hegemony and privacy. It is also important to note that my research findings cannot be generalizable to the populations past the ones I observed and interview responses only pertain to the views of the respondent. I do, however, feel confident in my results as they correlate to the Pew Research Center's findings in *Americans' views on mobile etiquette* of 2015, which collected data from a wider population.

References:

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