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The gift of the *gab?*: a design oriented sociology of young people's use of mobiles

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The gift of the *gab?*: a design oriented sociology of young people's use of 'mobiles!'

Abstract

This paper reports on an ethnographically informed observation of the use of mobile phones and text messaging services amongst young people. It offers a sociological explanation for the popularity of text messaging and for the sharing of mobile phones between co-proximate persons. Specifically, it reveals that young people use mobile phone content and the phones themselves to participate in the practices of gift exchange. By viewing mobile phone use in this way, the paper suggests a number of possibilities for future phone-based applications and supporting hardware.

Key words:

Design, ethnography, mobiles, phones, mobile phones, SMS, short messaging, texting, texters, teenagers, young people.

1. Introduction

We are all familiar with the common rhetoric used to describe mobile technologies. With mobile devices, we are told, we will be always available to those who love us or need us; we will always be capable of accessing the information we need and desire whether it be work related or to do with our personal financial affairs; we will be able to work wherever we want since information will be accessible anywhere; and though we may be apart from colleagues and friends, the mobile network will keep us in touch. Though it is recognised that current terminals and networks may inhibit the delivery of these scenarios, the slow but certain emergence of so-called 3rd generation networks and devices will enable us to live these visions. Mobile technology will be ubiquitous, though invisible; and each device will enable us to communicate whatever we want, whenever we want to whomever we want.

Of course we are all too sophisticated to fall for this view in all its respects, with many of us harbouring doubts about usability, cost, and even the desirability of mobile technologies. But there are more substantive reasons why one must be sceptical about such visions of a truly mobile future. As has been pointed out so many times in the CSCW literature, visions which place so much emphasis on technology tend to exaggerate the role technology may play in driving change.

That is, they tend to be overly deterministic. They also ignore the fact that when technologies are adopted they become part of an already established social context and this context often shapes the use of technologies. One consequence of this is that technologies often end up being used in unexpected ways.

A concern for exploring how social practices shape the future of mobile technologies underscores this paper. Specifically, we will describe recent research examining the role that mobile phones have come to play in teenager's social interactions. Using fieldwork data that captures the social nature of technology use, we will claim that mobile phones provide a medium through which young people can sustain and invigorate their social networks. We will show that mobile phones permit various peculiar 'communication' practices that enable young people to use more than mere talk or chitchat to cement their social relationships. These practices make use of text messages (over the short message service provided by all operators, known as SMS) and also the sharing of the phones themselves. These behaviours do not sit easily with typical conceptions of how mobile technologies will be used with their emphasis on peer-to-peer, real-time communications. We will suggest, however, that they can be thought of as forms of gift-giving. The performance of gift-giving, we will suggest, sometimes ritualised but always structured and reciprocal, acts to mediate the social relationships of teenagers. We will argue that although texting and mobile phone sharing may be new phenomena, they are a manifestation and a reflection of deeply routed needs in these social relationships, needs that have to do with systems of reciprocity and social solidarity. These needs, we will suggest, have been persistent in teenage cultures for many years and we think will continue to be so for years to come.

Following this, we will explicate how such an understanding of mobile phones and their use might be used to contribute to the design of future mobile technologies. Viewing particular phone-mediated interactions between young people as forms of gift-giving offers, we will suggest, numerous possibilities for informing the design of emerging technologies and new media. We will illustrate this by considering instances in which mobile phones either succeed or fail to adequately support the forms of gift exchange that young people perform. The consideration of these instances will be used to briefly introduce a number of preliminary design suggestions.

1.1 Method and brief overview of young people and mobile phone literature

The data used in this paper comes from a collection of observational field notes and group interview transcripts recorded during a study of mobile phone use amongst young people. The study took place in a sixth form college located in an English suburban town and lasted over 10 weeks. The observations recorded the mobile phone use of students between 16 to 19 years of age. The vast majority of data was recorded in the college's cafeteria, although data was also captured in the college hallways and in the areas immediately outside the college. Six students from the college participated in the group interviews that were held twice a week for a period of six weeks. The interviews were semi-structured and based on questions raised from early analyses of the observational data and of the discussions that took place during the interviews themselves.

Both the field notes and interviews raised numerous aspects about young people's use of mobile phones, some of which have already been reported in similarly focused studies. We found, for instance, that mobile phones were *de rigueur* among young people (Fortunati, 2001; Ling, 2000, Taylor, 2001), with the vast majority of the students observed owning their own phones and being what could be best described as seasoned users.

We also found that the use of the short messaging service (SMS) or texting, as it is colloquially known, was ubiquitous, although the typical claim that this is because it is "easy, quick and cheap" offered by some commentators (e.g., Eldridge, 2001; Grinter and Eldridge, 2001), did not adequately account for this. The young people's motivations for texting seemed normative, complex and deeply routed in their perceptions of social relations.

The presence and use of mobile phones was found to be common during 'localised' forms of interaction in particular (Weilenmann & Larsson, 2001). In these contexts, mobile phones were common place; they would be placed on the tables to be seen, pressed and prodded during frenzied chatter, gestured with to emphasise talk, and shared between small gatherings to view the latest text messages, game scores and address book entries.

All of this confirmed to us that the social shaping of mobile technology was underway, and that the particular form that this was taking has not been effectively predicted by earlier research. For example, one major salient point expected to affect the use of mobiles is the boundary between

public and private, and more specifically the intersection of work and leisure. According to Gannt and Kiesler (2001), for example, work concerns would invade private life, creating new systems of accountability and resistance. In fact, the evidence seems to point the other way, with private life invading both the work domain and public spaces (Harper, 2001). A similar reversal seems to be holding true for parent-child surveillance, where explorations of how this is being enhanced by mobility (e.g., Green, 2001) turns out to prove that young people, in fact, use mobile technology to evade parental supervision and surveillance. Gender, too, has been expected to result in differential take-up of mobile devices, with males being keener than females (Ling, 2001), and again the evidence is to the contrary.

1.2 Some initial evidence

It was this curious contrast between the extant literature and the evidence before us that forms the backdrop to the analysis reported here. For what we found in our research data was evidence of practices and motivations that had been hinted at by others but not fully explored. The evidence also underlined the fact that robust patterns of social relations seem to be at work, patterns that were absorbing and adopting the affordances of mobile communication technologies to achieve social organisational requirements.

In this section we introduce what we believe to be some of the compelling evidence of a specific form of phone-mediated interaction common between young people. Young people, we will suggest, use text messages, call-credit and mobile phones themselves as forms of *gifts*. We will contend that these gifts are exchanged in performances that have specific meanings in young people's daily lives and are played out with the intent to cement social relationships. To introduce this idea we first present an excerpt from the field notes. This example is typical of our corpus of data, but nicely illustrates the ways in which messages are sent and shared and how this process seems to have certain social, structural properties. More particularly, through this example we hope to illustrate what we mean by *gift-giving* in this context and sketch out the ways in which young people manage and organise the associated practices, including ritual ones.

Two girls, G2 and G4, are seated beside one another in the school canteen. G2 has just received a text message and shows it to G4 and four others at the table.

G4: Speaking to G2. "I had the same one [text message]. There was this other one I was going to send you. It was quite funny but I didn't." The discussion continues but is inaudible. Both girls lean over the phone and talk about the content of the message.

G2: "Alex, coming to you..." G2 tells G4 that she is sending her the message she has just received.

G4: "... right now!" *G4 acknowledges receipt and then looks at her phone's display. A discussion follows about a message that G4 wants to send to G2. Most of it is inaudible.*

G4: "... tell me if you get it..." *G4 is having problems sending the message. "Okay Sammy, I'm just going to show it to you because it's not going to send."*

G2 and G4 start to show each other various messages they have received. The rest of the table are also shown the messages.

This exchange illustrates how text messages can be used as gifts between young people. The excerpt begins with the two girls discussing a message G2 has received. G2 then forwards the message to G4, which is followed with further talk between the two. This initiates the gift-giving ritual; G2 offers G4 what Mauss has termed the "opening gift" (1997, p. 26). In doing so, she takes on the role of the donor, or giver. The offered message is used as a concrete, tangible focus to the social exchange that ensues. The two girls lean over the phone, talk about the message's content and establish its shared meaning. In response to G2's message and fulfilling her role as the recipient, G4 reciprocates by returning a message she has stored on her own phone. The exchange is temporarily halted because G4 is unable to send the message from her phone, but is then re-established through alternative means. G4's obligation to reciprocate is thus met through the return of a gift.

This example shows how the use of technology, specifically the mobile telephone, mediates gift exchange. In it, we see how the phone provides a means through which meaning can be embodied and thus shared. We also see how the roles of gift exchange are adopted through the electronic offering of the embodied. These roles hint at the ritual that is performed and the ritual rights and duties of each party. This ritual performance – the offer of the gift, the receipt of the gift and the reciprocation to the gift - cements the relationship between the girls; it acts as a tangible means through which they can express their feelings towards one another. Lastly, the reciprocation of a further message denotes a balance in the relationship: it brings closure to this exchange, leaving the participating parties on an equal footing.

Gift-giving of this kind has received very little attention in the fields that explore the use and design of media and technology. This lack of attention is particularly evident in research related to mobile technologies where we know of no work that has attempted to investigate such issues. In the following section we describe, in greater detail, how the various practices that young people perform with their mobile phones may be seen as forms of gift-giving that bare particular

meanings. To illustrate this, a number of characteristics of gift-giving will be drawn from the sociology and anthropology literature.

2. Gift-giving and Mobile Phone Use

2.1 Embodied meaning and ritual

For many, the exchange of gifts is a common part of everyday life. Most of us take it for granted that this exchange of the physical is designed to signify feelings such as thanks, caring, love and trust, and is, in turn, meant to result in pleasure or well being for the recipient.¹ The gift, as Berking (1999, p. 9) puts it, “makes feelings concrete”, it embodies something of ourselves; the material offering makes tangible something of us as givers and our relationship with the recipient (also see Schwartz, 1967; Cheal, 1986, 1987; Mauss, 1997). The gift, for example, helps us to order our memories into things that can be “grasped and held” and thus becomes associated with “particular histories and bound up with particular individuals” (Berking, 1999, p.5). The mobile phone and its content provide young people with several possible means of organising their memories in such concrete terms. The text message, for example, can embody that which is sacred to the owner.

- Jennifer: Plus you can read them [text messages] as well later. Like I can keep them and read them later.
- Alex: Why do you want to read them later?
- Jennifer: I don't know – if it's a nice message or something.
- Susan: Yeah, Peter sends me loads of nice messages and I want to keep them all. It's so sad cause he sends me so many nice ones and I have to delete some. I feel horrible.
- Jennifer: I know and then you feel really sad.
- Susan: And like I really don't want to give the phone back because it's got so many little memories and things on. And it's not the same having them written down so I'm sending them to my other phone.
- Alex: Why is it not the same?
- Susan: I don't know. I know it sounds stupid but...
- Jennifer: They don't look the same.
- Susan: It's just not the same cause it's not from him anymore. It's just like me writing it down. It's just really sad. Maybe I'm just over emotional about my text messages.
- Jennifer: And it's even the same when you put them in the 'outbox' and they lose all the time and they lose whose it's from and everything.
- Susan: That's why I think we should have memory cards because I would buy millions, really I would...I really hate deleting messages that are nice you know. Like when

someone's said something that's really sweet or just like really personal or something.

In this extract from the interview transcripts, Jennifer and Susan reveal that text messages and memories can become intimately entwined. Susan speaks of the phone as containing "so many little memories". These memories are embodied in things such as text messages that have emotional significance and that can be used to recall past thoughts and feelings through later readings. The message thus resembles a gift in so far as it carries with it symbolic meaning, meaning that is expressly manifest for the recipient. In expressing this quality of the gift, Mauss writes of the Melanesian objects of exchange, but could just as well be talking of the messages exchanged between young people: "Each one, at least the dearest and most sought after... has its name, a personality, a history, and even a tale attached to it." (Mauss, 1997, p. 24)

Jennifer and Susan also talk of the importance of keeping the text messages in their original form so as to accurately preserve the embodied memories. Transforming the electronic to the handwritten loses something of the message, possibly the handcrafted 'moniker' of the sender. The written text message is thus seen to bare the hallmarks of the crafted gift. As Cheal (1987, p.158) writes, the "object that is made by hand is not quite like any other object. It is unique, and carries the inescapable marks of the person who made it. The infusion of the person into the product..."

It is through the offering of the gift – the *ritual exchange* – that the gift takes on its meaning (Berking, 1999). Thus, the meaning is expressed not only in the gift, or by giver and recipient, but also by the occasioned ceremony in which the exchange takes place (Cheal, 1987). For text messages or voice calls, for instance, it is through the ritual offering, and all that ensues, that the everyday, tangible artefact becomes wrapped, ceremoniously, in meaning.

Alex: What about you Mark. What do you use your phone for?

Mark: Well, I mostly ring the lady [laughs]... and spend about half an hour. That's why my phone bill's so high.

Alex: What talking?

Mark: Yeah, talking. Of course I have to text her, you know, when I go to bed... [sounds of acknowledgement from others].

Alex: You have to? What do you mean you have to?

Helen: It's your duty really.

Mark: Yeah, you have to.

Susan: It's the rules!

- Alex: The rules! What are the rules?
Helen: You need to say 'good night'.
Mark: Yeah, you need to say 'good night', you need to say 'good morning'...
Alex: Otherwise?
Susan: Otherwise they get stropy and they dump you for being insensitive! [group laugh]
Alex: What happened before mobiles?
Helen: Well you could phone and say 'Night. I love you, bye.'
Mark: Yeah, I used to ring her before I went to bed yeah, but in the morning that couldn't happen. Really, this [picks up his mobile] has made my life hell!

In this extract, Mark tells the group about the regular 'goodnight' text message he sends to his girlfriend. His description of this practice, a practice documented elsewhere in the literature (Grinter and Eldridge, 2001), illustrates its ritual nature. The practice is ordered and those present in the interview recognise Mark's moral obligation to re-enact it nightly, despite his apparent misgivings. "It's the rules!" Susan tells us. Thus the ritual is laid in stone, so to speak. The nightly offering of the text message has become part of the normal course of events, but still signifies the special intimacy between Mark and his girlfriend. Writing of the gift-giving exchange, Schwartz (1967, p. 7) emphasises both the symbolic nature of the gift and the importance of ritual ceremony: "The ceremonial display of such objectifications is a powerful tendency in social life: persons invariably seek to make known their social bonds in daily encounters." In short, this example illustrates how the normal, mundane encounter is made special through the observation of ceremony. This ceremony is ritualising, insofar as it results in the meaning of the message being thereby altered in ways that gives it semi-sacred values. These values are manifest in the desire to keep the message, to share it and to value it over and above its mere textual form. More particularly, the text message comes to mean more than merely an exchange of words, but becomes an offering of commitment to the relationship. It is recognised that if the ritual is not upheld the relationship will be put at risk – that Mark will be 'dumped'.

2.2 Obligations of exchange

Three boys sit at a table in the canteen. B1 has a phone to his ear, but is talking to the two other boys at his table. B1 finishes with the phone. He then stands to talk to someone, leaving the phone on the table. B2 picks up the phone and starts to interact with it (pressing the buttons). B1 returns and B2 places the phone back on the table. B1 takes the phone and glances at the display. He then places the phone back on the table. A few seconds later he picks the phone up again and starts to use it with one hand. He stops to talk to his friends and places the phone back on the table. B3, the third boy at the table, then picks up the phone and starts to interact with it. The three boys then all get up to leave. B3 carries the phone by his side.

This example of phone sharing is one of many we recorded during the course of our observations. In this instance, it is not entirely clear which of the boys the phone belongs to. All three of them interact with the phone at some point and seem to take and use the phone at will. This suggests that there may well be an unspoken acceptance that phones are shared objects between friends. Thus, in localised interactions, the phone can be passed between those members of a group without the need for formal acts of offering or acceptance. The ubiquity of these instances of phone sharing has led us to believe that the ritual of exchange does, in fact, exist as an integral part of young people's everyday, phone-mediated interactions. In many respects it is taken for granted. Jennifer, one of the interview participants, confirms this:

Most people do do that. They just pick up the phone and not even asking you they start playing... I've seen people just leave their phone. Like put it on the table and then just leave. Like sometimes just leave it in the canteen. Like they trust other people, but they know that someone's going to... like pick up the phone or something.

Jennifer's description reveals that there is some purpose to this sharing of the mobile phone. She implies that the owner of the phone is demonstrating his or her trust in others by placing it on the table. That is, by placing the phone "on offer" the owner shows that he or she trusts those at the table to accept the offer, though it comes with certain terms. Before saying what those terms are, the offering of a phone does meet what Mauss (1997) refers to as his or her *obligation to give* through the provision of a gift and through the expectation that the gift will promote the proper ties and allegiances. This obligation to give is further illustrated by Susan's feelings about her dwindling call-credit:

Everyone's going to hate me when I get back to college because I've used up all my credit so I don't think I'm going to be able to use my phone anymore. Cause everyone's like 'Susan, Susan, can I use your phone?' And I'm like 'Yeah, yeah, yeah.' And then now I've just texted Peter for five days running just the whole day – cause he works at the garage and doesn't do anything so he just sits there texting me. And then, umm,... so now I've got none... Well, I've got like £3.

Here, Susan talks of her obligation to offer her phone to her college friends. By having spent much of her credit 'texting' Peter and thus not being able to offer her phone to her friends, she feels that she will be socially ostracised – possibly too strong a term, but certainly in keeping with her own summation that her inability to meet her obligation will lead to her being 'hated' by those at college. This suggests that Susan is, in fact, morally obliged to offer her phone to her friends if she wishes to remain allied to them. Susan, it seems, is in full agreement with Mauss'

reasoning for the obligation to give (1997, p. 13): “To refuse to give...just as to refuse to accept... is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality.”

In response to the gift, the recipient is compelled to accept. The receipt of the gift acknowledges the donor's participation in the occasion and, more importantly, the donor's role in the larger social network. This *obligation to accept*, as a part of the gift-giving ritual, is apparent in the data. In the following extract we see that there is an expectation that recipients will accept their gifts of calls or text messages.

- Alex: [Asks where they use their phones and what for.]
Jennifer: Mostly text messages, I think... At home, in my room, on my bed.
Alex: In bed? [group laughs]
Jenny: She sends ones at like one o'clock in the morning. You get a message from her.
Jennifer: And then I get moody if they don't reply and it's like one o'clock in the morning. I've got ones that are recorded at like three o'clock in the morning. [group laughs]
It's like wicked.
Alice: And I do that to. Sometimes I'm like 'okay, if I'm not sleeping then you have no right to be asleep.'
Jennifer: Yeah, that's what I do. 'How dare you be asleep when I'm awake?'
Alice: ... and then I wake them up. And if I send a message and I see that they're ignoring it then I call them. [Laughs] It rings and they just can't get away from me. They go like 'HELLO!' I'm like: 'Hi! Were you sleeping? Oh shame. How are you?'
Jennifer: 'Oh my god! You're asleep. It's really early. It's only one.' I haven't been to sleep before one for ages actually. It's really bad.

As Alice and Jennifer make clear, the recipient is thus obliged to meet the 'challenge' of the donor. The messages and calls made from their bedrooms in the early hours are performed with the expectation that they will be accepted, even under threat. Demands such as “you have no right...” and “how dare you...” haunt the recipient making the acceptance virtually impulsive. As Helen, another participant, explains: “My boyfriend's at Uni so he'll get in late after a night at the Union and he'll phone me at about half three in the morning and stupidly I answer the phone...”

By accepting the 'challenge' the recipient also accepts the *obligation to reciprocate* or show gratitude. As Cheal writes (1986, p. 426): “Reciprocal giving makes possible a shared understanding of the relationship as one that is founded upon mutual regard and cooperation.” So, in response to an offer of call credit or a text message, for instance, the recipient is obliged to reciprocate in kind.

- Sarah: Oh, it's like yesterday - me and my best friend - we all went out to diner and stuff. She didn't take her phone with her so she was like sitting there texting her boyfriend and using my phone.
- Alex: So how does that work out?... Do you let someone use your phone and then sort of...
- Sarah: Cause she lets me use hers.
- Alex: ... but why would you use hers if you got yours?
- Sarah: Yeah, but the thing is, the person I phone has got a One-2-One and she's got a One-2-One and her boyfriend's got a One-2-One and Orange so she can use mine if she chooses to. It doesn't really matter.
- Alex: So you just have arrangements with friends?
- Sarah: Yeah, so if I go out I go 'can I use your phone?' and she'll go 'yeah, yeah, fine.' And I go 'yeah, you can use mine.' So we don't really like... I mean she paid for my last credit as well.
- Alex: Arr right, so you all pay for each other's credit and use each other's phones?
- Sarah: Yeah. I err,... I paid for... I gave money to her little brother cause he doesn't have money. He doesn't work or nothing. So I give like £5 for his Vodaphone - cause he's got Vodaphone. So he tops it up using my money or using his sister's money. So we both lend him money and stuff.

Sarah describes this practice of reciprocity and the obligation each party have to uphold it. She explains that phones are swapped and credit exchanged in the knowledge that the offers will be reciprocated in time and in the appropriate context. She recounts the reciprocal relationship she has arranged, most probably implicitly, with her friend and describes how their understanding of the complex relationship between call charges and the network operators are used to assign value to the gifts in particular situations. This illustrates how the value of a gift is determined by the occasion, more of which will be discussed later. Sarah also describes how call-credit is exchanged between friends. Offers of credit can be exchanged for further credit to be reciprocated at a later date or, as Sarah implies, as a symbol of friendship. Thus, Sarah pays for her friend's brother's credit not for selfless reasons, but simply because he is implicated in the social network Sarah wishes to sustain.

In the following extract, Susan and Alice introduce the ideas of currency and trade-off as part of this practice of reciprocity.

- Susan: Well, loads of the time now, when people don't have credit, umm... they'll say to someone else 'ooh, can I borrow your phone?' And like recently especially, everyone in my group has been doing that, saying 'ooh can I borrow your phone for this?'
- Alex: So how does that become acceptable because clearly it's an expense for other people?

- Susan: Yeah, but with friends then,... they give it back in different ways and like sometimes...
- Alice: Because if you let them use your phone when they don't have credit chances are when you don't have then they might have and then you can share.
- Susan: Yeah, it's like a trade off.
- Alex: It's almost like anything, like borrowing money for a drink or something.
- Susan: Yeah. And cause you know how most companies have stopped doing £5 credit vouchers,... So if someone's only got £5 then they'll like buy you lunch and then you'll give them some credit or whatever.
- Alex: So it actually ends up being sort of almost a direct swap then?
- Alice: A kind of currency.

Susan and Alice see the sharing of both phones and credit as part of a larger practice of exchange. Through their explanations of what they see as the normal and routine use of their phones, we catch sight of further evidence of the *norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1973). By talking in more abstract terms about currency and trade-off, they reveal that their rules of exchange are part of a larger value system where one's actions are held to account and where the mechanisms of moral obligation come to play. This system allows people to employ the tangible in a way that binds them through unspoken contracts. In describing this mixture of things, values, contracts and people, Mauss eloquently writes:

In short, this represents an intermingling. Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together. This is precisely what contract and exchange are. (Mauss, 1997, p. 20)

The 'intermingling' of things with people, and people with people, is further illustrated with another example from the interview data where Jennifer and Alice talk about the obligation a recipient has to reply to a text message.

- Jennifer: ...and if you don't reply...
- Alice: and if you don't reply they go 'ok are you going to tell me'...
- Jennifer: if you don't reply they go 'are you ignoring me? Are you still awake?' [Group laugh]... And then you get a bit annoyed if someone doesn't reply to you. Like, are 'are you going to reply to me? Are you ignoring me now?'
- Alex: So there is like an obligation to continue the discussion?
- Jennifer: And yeah like the person who finishes it... They always say 'see you tomorrow.' 'Ok, see you tomorrow.' And you reply to them 'ok goodbye. Goodnight' and they go 'oh good night, have a nice sleep. Are you doing anything tomorrow?' I've tried to end the conversation four times and they don't end the conversation [group laughs].

Besides the clear indication Jennifer and Alice give of the obligation to reciprocate, Jennifer also makes reference to what Gouldner (1973) refers to as the cycle of reciprocity. She tells of the ongoing exchange of messages that take place during the ceremonial 'goodnight' ritual in which neither party wishes to be seen as weakening. Gouldner reflects on this pattern, citing Malinowski's seminal work that documents the exchange between inland communities and fishing villages. Using Malinowski's words, Gouldner writes: "Neither partner can refuse, neither may stint, and neither should delay" (1973, p. 240).² Gouldner goes on to explain that this "beneficent cycle of mutual reinforcement" is enacted because of what he refers to as the *moral norm of reciprocity*, a norm that he explains as "a concrete and special mechanism involved in the maintenance of any stable social system" (Gouldner, 1973, p. 247).

2.3 Alliance and friendship

Much of what young people do with their phones revolves around the exchange of phone content and of the phones themselves. Exchanging phones and content is very much a part of young people's everyday interactions, providing them with a tangible means to express their relationships with one another. Through such phone-mediated gift-giving and the customary reciprocation, the moral commitment to young people's relationships are demonstrated and preserved. In the following extract, Helen and Mark talk about how phones play a role in their conversations and explain that phones have become a common topic of conversation, even usurping the ever-present football talk.

- Helen: It [the mobile phone] does give like new topics to talk about if you do get a message. Or like you can just be looking at it and say 'oh I've just got this really funny message. Do you want to read it?' to people... And if there's an awkward silence in conversation: 'oh look, there's my phone... Isn't it lovely.'
- Alex: Yeah. There's a lot of talk about phones as well. You often hear people talking about them. What did they talk about before phones?
- Mark: That's what I... I think there's a lot more gossip with mobiles.
- Helen: There's a lot less football... talk.
- Mark: There's a lot more gossip as a whole through text messaging and things like that.
- Helen: yeah it's like 'did you hear?'...
- Mark: ... and you wonder how it happened before hand.

Helen's account, at the beginning of the above extract, provides us with two examples of how she might initiate the offering of an 'opening gift'. She describes how she might use the offer of a new text message reading or something to do with her phone to begin a new topic of

conversation. She and Mark go on to suggest that such conversations, and presumably similar offerings, are commonly performed in daily talk amongst young people.

Offerings of this kind, performed through common patterns of talk, have, it would seem, given rise to a means of communicating friendship and solidarity (Gouldner, 1973, Cheal 1986). Phones give young people something to talk about amongst themselves, providing them with yet one more mechanism for sharing their emotional experiences and exchanging objects of personal significance. An example from the field notes demonstrates this sharing of the emotional through the tangible. In it, Lisa and Sarah, also participants in the group interviews, are in the canteen sat near to one of the authors.

Lisa and Sarah are sitting at different tables both with their heads down looking at their displays – both seem to be ‘texting’. Lisa walks over to Sarah. Sarah shows Lisa her display – Lisa takes Sarah’s mobile and reads the display. They talk briefly, looking intermittently at Sarah’s phone, and then Lisa returns to her seat. Lisa looks towards me and says: “We’re addicted to these phones!” and then looks down to her phone’s display to interact with her phone. Lisa goes back to Sarah and they both start to talk to each other. As they’re talking Lisa receives a message. She reads it and then shows it to Sarah. As they talk, Lisa writes something on her display and shows it to Sarah. I assume she shows her a message she is preparing to send. Later on Lisa holds the mobile. She seems to be ‘coveting’ it as she speaks to Sarah.

Sarah, in this example, begins the gift-giving ritual by offering Lisa a view of her phone’s display. It is not entirely clear what Sarah is showing Lisa, but the context to the exchange suggests it is a text message. They appear to discuss this message for a moment before Lisa returns to her table. Later, Lisa shows Sarah a message she has received, reciprocating Sarah’s earlier offer. She goes on to show Sarah what appears to be a reply to this message. This exchange suggests a certain intimacy between Lisa and Sarah. Showing each other their messages, the girls not only offer each other the concrete, but also an intangible show of trust and loyalty. The messages become something that is shared privately between the two, cementing their ties to one another.

This intimate exchange through the use of the phone is further illustrated, although only momentarily, in the extract presented below.

Four girls sit at a table. One girl, G1, sits with her mobile (Nokia 3210) on the table. Sitting next to her, G2 takes the mobile and looks at the display. The two crouch down towards each other and over the mobile. The mobile becomes their central focus and draws them away

from the other two who are talking. After a few moments, G1 takes the mob from G2 and they return to talking with the others. G1 sits, holding her purse and her mobile in her hand.

On this occasion, two girls, G1 and G2, withdraw from their larger group to talk to one another. The first thing to notice is that G1 has made an 'offer' by placing her phone on the table and making it publicly available. In picking up the phone and holding it so that it is between the two of them, G2 accepts this 'offer'. In doing so, G2 physically distances them both from the larger group. The physical presence of the phone seems to embody a shared (although only fleeting) focus between the two girls, allowing them to establish a subordinate interchange or 'sideplay' (Goffman, 1981). The sideplay presents something of symbolic meaning to both the girls and to the others present. It creates a bond between them through breaking the bond with others achieved by dint of co-presence. Thus, it ties the two girls together, establishing a temporally bounded sense of intimacy and necessarily excluding those around them.

The next extract reveals how phones can be shared between slightly larger groups. The phones are passed around, shared and exchanged with little need for discussion or negotiation.

A group of four girls sit round a table. Two of the girls are using mobiles phones. One, G1, looks as though she is playing a game. She is heavily engaged with the phone and seems focused on it. The other, G2, is looking at a mob's display with a third girl, G3. They laugh and talk as they look at the phone. G2 hands the mobile to G3 and then retrieves another phone from a bag on the table. Meanwhile, G1 has taken G3's mob and now holds two phones – one in each hand. She seems to be pressing the keys on one of the mobs and looking between them (perhaps copying something). The four girls carry on interacting with their phones. Eventually, four phones are visible at the table; all are Nokias and all seem to be customised with bright and colourful covers. They share their phones, looking between the displays, swapping them and handling them. What is striking is that the focus on the phones seems to be accepted practice. No one seems unfamiliar with or perturbed by the fact that they are central to the ongoing interactions.

Through sharing and exchanging their phones and phone content in this way, all four girls implicitly demonstrate their intimacy with one another. By offering the phone or its content and by taking another's phone, or by reading another's content, each of the girls is at once committing themselves to the obligations of giving, accepting and reciprocation and thus at the same time conforming to an agreement of mutual dependence or, as Susan puts it, an agreement to 'share'. "It's all a trust thing really. It's nice to have that with someone cause you don't have to say it. It's just an underlying agreement... that you can share..." Through gift and counter-gift, then, this agreement binds the girls together. The phone and its content, it might be said, allows young

people to take part in gift-giving using distinct repertoires, or 'social markers', through which they are able to negotiate and renegotiate their social relationships (Nettle & Dunbar, 1997).

Further evidence of the mobile phone's role in cementing (or rupturing) relationships is also apparent in the responses that young people describe when they do not receive text messages. The receipt of very few or no messages over the course of a day can lead to breaches in the underlying agreements between friends, causing either giver or recipient to feel rejected or excluded from their social networks. Alice and Jennifer capture this nicely in their explanation of what it is like not to receive text messages.

Jennifer: Maybe you're like 'oh, I really want a message. I really, really want a message.'

Alice: Oh, there are some days when my phone does not beep at all. I'm like 'ok nobody likes me. NOBODY knows me!'...

Alex: So in a way you're... if you don't get a call or a text message...?

Jennifer: You feel a bit depressed.

Alice: Because there is not a day that my phone does not go off ringing, ringing, ringing, or text messages just come flooding in. So if there's a day where it's quiet - All I get is probably one message all morning or all afternoon - I'm like 'what is wrong with the world?'

Jennifer: You think 'have I upset someone?' Cause I was like that last week cause I fell out with somebody. I thought 'oh my god maybe she's turned everybody against me' because nobody phoned me that night either. So I was phoning people: 'Hello! Hello!' Having a little chat with them.

In this extract, Jennifer and Alice describe how they feel depressed or upset when they do not hear from their friends. Both girls, it seems, expect their friends to continue with the cycle of gift and counter-gift – the cycle of reciprocity. When they fear the cycle to be broken, they feel there is something amiss – something “wrong with the world” – and that their peers must have turned against them. Recounting one particular instance, Jennifer suggests that attempts can be made to reinstate the cycle through further offerings. Thus the message of “Hello!” is sent to re-establish the bonds of allegiance. Though such offerings may seem altogether mundane, they are key to sustaining the social relationship as a whole. As Berking puts it in relationship to any and all attempts to “make up”, their purpose is to “celebrate the periodic consolidation of the collective in question, reproduce and evoke the requisite feelings, and thereby, in a kind of analogy with the annual cycle of offerings in archaic society, renew the foundation of the community, the normative expectations of its members, and the moral ties between each individual.” (Berking, 1999, p. 19)

Trust and reciprocity both play a significant role in the gift-giving patterns and rituals that construct and cement social relationships (Schwartz, 1967, p. 4). For young people, the rituals of exchange, mediated through phone use, are similarly dependent upon trust and reciprocity. The phone provides young people with a means of both demonstrating and testing out the trust that exists in their relationships. This is born out through meeting their obligations to reciprocate. The mutual dependence that derives from obligations, such as replying to text messages or repaying borrowed credit, binds people together, establishing and reinforcing the moral order of friendship and social intimacy. The mobile phone then, is one of the many objects that young people use to perform the rituals of communion embodied in the exchange of the tangible. As Sarah puts it: "It's like if you borrow each other's CDs or Books or anything. It's just like that really. I can't exactly... It's like if you trust someone then obviously you're going to lend it to them."

2.4 Status and rivalry

As we have seen, the gift-exchange, through the principle of reciprocity, establishes a connectedness between individuals or groups. In apparent contradiction, gift-giving, by changing the balance of a relationship, produces an environment suitable for the demonstration of status and rivalry between individuals or groups. Both status and rivalry are subject to the obligation of reciprocity (Schwartz, 1967, Mauss, 1997). As the recipient is obliged to reciprocate the giving of a gift in the form of gratitude, he or she is immediately placed in a position of inferiority. Without a proportional show of gratitude the imbalance remains and gives rise to a status differential, where the giver takes on a position of seniority and the recipient is indebted until sufficient gratitude is expressed (Gouldner, 1973). The phone and its content, like other objects of exchange, are mechanisms through which these struggles of power and rivalry can be played out. The offering of a voice call, for example, can symbolise more than just intent to show affection or allegiance. It can also be used to place the giver in a position of power over the recipient. As Alice explains below, the voice call can become a useful object of exchange through which authority can be asserted over one's boyfriend.

You can use it to wind people up. Sometimes when, umm, I call him [her boyfriend], I call his phone and the minute it rings – just the first ring – I'll hang up. 'Ring' – first ring and I'll hang up and I'll do that about five or six times. And I'm always afraid he's in a lesson. He doesn't tend to switch his phone off or put it on silent. It's always on *personal*. So if it rings I know it's going to interrupt his lesson. If I'm feeling evil I just do that and I call him like six times and just hang up each time and then eventually he'll switch it off. And then he'll call me and go: 'You stupid girl. Why were you calling me?' I'm like: 'Calling you? Oh my phone must have been... I forgot to lock it or something so I must have sat on it or

something.' I'm like 'how dare you call me stupid!' and he starts apologising. I feel really good. I've never told him that I actually do it intentionally. He doesn't know that yet,... but it's fun... Like I do it when Ezra is there sometimes and she just laughs and then she hears him apologising because I just go 'how dare you call me stupid!' and I pretend that I'm taking offence and he just thinks that I'm really getting offended. And he's like: 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You know I love you really. I'm so sorry, I'll never ever...' And Ezra's going 'Oh my God, oh my God. He is such a dunce!' I'm like "Yeah!" So you can have fun making fun of people.

This colourful excerpt reveals how Alice is able to position herself as the dominant member in her relationship with her boyfriend. She makes the offering of a call to her boyfriend when she knows it will provide her with the upper hand. She performs the offering when she feels "evil", she tells us, and does so when her boyfriend is in class and unable to reciprocate. Along with the embarrassment and trouble receiving a call in class might bring, the boyfriend can only feel further subordinated through Alice's moves to take the upper hand. In class, he is forced to accept offer after offer and cannot meet his obligation to reciprocate, leaving him indebted and caught in a position of inferiority with no means of recourse.

Noticeably, Alice plays on her boyfriend's obligation to reciprocate in the situation she recounts. Knowing that her boyfriend is obliged to reciprocate and that he is likely to attempt a counter play for positioning, she is prepared for his retaliation. She claims innocence when he admonishes her for the disruption and reciprocates with a further counter move, exclaiming 'how dare you call me stupid!' Eventually, the boyfriend withdraws from the escalating exchange. In doing so, he relinquishes any control he may have had in the exchange and submits to Alice's authority.

As an aside, we should note one additional point of interest in this excerpt. From Alice's account it is evident that the *performance* of the exchange with her boyfriend is of particular value. Alice explains that her boyfriend's apologies are a source of amusement for her friend, Ezra. What this highlights is the performative aspects of the exchange ceremony. By finding amusement in the boyfriend's admissions of *mea culpa*, Ezra reaffirms Alice's position of dominance. The importance of this role is illustrated in Alice's description. Alice uses Ezra's role as onlooker to endorse the relative status of the participants – to legitimate each party's participation and to ensure the account is recognised to be an accurate telling of the exchange. The onlooker is thus not only someone who confirms the passing of the event, but can also be used to legitimate the event at a later date.

In the following extract from the interview transcripts, Alice further alludes to the manner in which reciprocity has its part to play in the rivalry between giver and recipient. She reveals that not only can the recipient's failure to reciprocate be a cause of tension, so to can the offering of a gift of insufficient value.

- Alice: There's some people I refuse to send messages to because I know they won't reply because they never have credit on their phone yet they always expect you to send them messages. And if they do eventually decide to reply they'll send it over the Internet. Oh, that bugs me by the way. I hate it when people send messages...
- Jennifer: What 'powered by...'
- Alice: Yeah, 'powered by Yahoo' or whatever.
- Jenny: You never know who it's from as well, because sometimes they forget to sign it.
- Alice: Yeah. It just really, really bugs me. I just don't reply. I don't even acknowledge whoever sends it. Even after they tell me 'oh by the way it was me.' I go 'Oh was it. Ok.'
- Alex: Why is that?
- Alice: I don't... Because they expect me to send them messages which is fine. 'Ok I send you messages and you don't reply because you refuse to put credit on your phone' – not because they don't have the money. They just don't wanna! And when they do decide to reply you do it by the Internet. It's just cheap! It's lame!

Alice first reveals how the failure to reply to a text message can lead to the breakdown in mutual exchange. She tells us that she refuses to send messages to those who do not reply. She describes the irritation caused by those who expect messages to be sent – gifts to be offered – but do not reply. This failure to reciprocate can be taken in one of two ways. As we saw in the earlier example, it can be seen as a relinquishing of rights and status. Alternatively, it can be seen as an act of hostility – a declaration of “war” in Mauss' words (1997). In this example, Alice has little sympathy for the absence of reciprocity and takes a hostile stance against those who are unwilling to reciprocate.

Alice explains that this hostility can be further exacerbated if the reply is written and sent using one of the free text messaging services available on the Internet. “I hate it when people send messages... 'powered by Yahoo' or whatever” she says. She sees these counter-gifts as insufficient in value and thus an affront. She refers to the response as “cheap”, transforming what might initially be seen as a mutual and fair exchange into one of tit for tat – an exchange of goods where value, and specifically economic value, determines status. Alice's reaction is captured in Schwartz' words: “One expresses unfriendliness through gift giving by breaking the rule of approximate reciprocity (returning a gift in near, but not exact, value of that received). Returning

“tit for tat” transforms the relationships into an economic one and expresses a refusal to play the role of grateful recipient” (1967, p. 6).

In this last example, we see that not only through the management of offerings and receipt, but also through the presentations of gifts with assigned value do young people manage their relationships with one another. The exchange processes – the to and fro of text messages, along with other phone-mediated rituals of exchange – provide a backdrop to the plays and counter plays of rivalry and the organisation of rank, or status, accomplished by performances of particular kinds. The gift, with its embodied meaning – the text message, the call, etc. – and its value are thus a means of demonstrating positions of rivalry and status. Next, we will write of the ways in which value is assigned to gifts, revealing that gifts do not simply have a predetermined value through which the positions of rivalry and status can be demonstrated.

2.5 Value

The objects of exchange offered via the phone are assigned particular values by young people. The value of an object can be determined by the object itself: what it is and how it is formed. The text message, for example, is seen to have greater or lesser value if written in particular ways.

Alice: I hate it when they do it [send text messages] in capitals and sometimes when they don't put punctuation marks in, ah, it annoys me. Another thing I've noticed is that... Ok, you're going outside the normal rules of the normal everyday English language writing and everything and so because of that you don't have to keep conforming to the commas, full stops, and the capitals and all that. But still, it bugs me when people refuse to do it properly. They put three words together and there's no indication of where it starts or where it ends, no full stop, no nothing. It just looks horrible.

Alex: So when you say do it properly you mean there's almost an acceptable way... There's like...

Alice: Yeah, because there's some words for instance... if you don't have enough space ok and you're too cheap to send two messages instead of one, what you can do is probably,... your '&' - use the symbol – so even if you join it together – the fact that there's a symbol in between it – that kind of isn't as bad as if you squashed everything together and it was all three just looking urgh...

Although Alice admits that written text messages fall outside the normal rules of written language, she implies that there are proper ways to construct messages. An improperly composed message is viewed as 'horrible'. Alice associates such messages with people who are too 'cheap'

to send longer messages. In doing so she imposes a value system upon messages based on their form.

For gifts such as text messages, value is also associated with who sent the gift and the context in which it was sent and received. As Alice suggests, it tends to be the personal messages from her boyfriend that are valuable and worth keeping: "I don't keep sick messages. I tend to delete them. So I haven't got any of the ones... I usually only keep the ones my boyfriend sends me because they're sweet." Susan adds to this, recognising that messages are only of interest to particular people in certain contexts.

Well, it's like anything really. Only certain things appeal to certain people. So it's not... like one text message is going to appeal to all of my friends in college. And like, you know like some people will like that my boyfriend will text me to say 'love you' or something, but some people would say 'oh my god.' You know 'I'm single! Rub it in!' whatever... Personal messages aren't really something you share.

Show a boyfriend's message to a friend who is single and expect a less than positive response Susan tell us. The value of a text message is seen to be equally, if not more questionable in other contexts. For example, the ending of a relationship through the use of the text message is regarded as the most contemptible use of the technology.

Jennifer: That is the worst way. That is like a bitchy thing to do [laughs with Jenny]

Alice: That is worse than writing a letter or saying...

Jennifer: Our friend, he's really gullible, he's really weak ok. He's really lovely. His girlfriend has dumped him four times in four weeks and it was over text messages.

Alex: So why is that the worst way?

Jennifer: Cause it's so impersonal. It's like over the Internet as well.

Alice: It's... It's very... It's worse than being a coward. It's worse than calling someone when you know they're a thousand miles away and going 'oh yeah, by the way, you're dumped.' It's terrible. I mean I knew someone in the previous year... The year above me... She was going out with this guy... Well she was really into him and she thought he felt the same way and everything, so they slept together. The next day he sends her a text. She was really, really happy and then I think something happened at College and then she wasn't feeling so good anyway. And then all she gets is a text... you know the happy 'oh yeah, my boyfriend's sent me a text, he'll make things better thing.' And it said, 'you're dumped.' Okay, that's not funny. And she was just crying...

Jennifer: It's the same if people ask you out over text messages. It's just cowardly.

Alice: I've never heard never heard of that one.

Jennifer: The Internet's the same. When people are going out over the Internet. It's really stupid. I think it's silly anyway – they haven't actually ever met each other.

Alice: It's... I hate to use this term... It's a copout. It's lame. I don't know that's me personally cause I hate to leave things without knowing... I don't know, it's just unfinished business. You can't just send a message and say, you know, 'you're dumped.' Just call me and say we need to talk... 'We need to talk' can only mean one thing.

This use of the text message clearly leaves Jennifer and Alice feeling strongly about its value. Being 'dumped' with a text message is 'bitchy', it's a 'copout', it's 'lame', it's the 'worst way'. These terms are used to express what Jennifer and Alice feel is the impersonal nature of the text message in this context. In quite a different context, however, the text message can be seen as an invaluable object of exchange. Talking of text messaging in general, Susan feels that "it's cool cause you can talk about anything. Like, you can talk about your love life or your friends, or like mean people or anything." Her view is of quite a different object of exchange with quite different understandings of value to the impersonal messages that Jennifer and Alice refer to.

The distinction between messages that are personal, or private, and messages that are aimed at a larger audience is yet another way in which value is assigned to messages. The public messages – the jokes or those sent to groups – are seen as disposable whereas the personal messages are felt to be the invaluable residue of important memories or happenings. Susan and Jennifer talk about this distinction in the extract below:

Alex: ...So what is that distinction for you between public and private? What are the messages that you sort of think 'oh these are for me and ...'

Susan: It's all the jokes that are shared around...

Jennifer: and that aren't too personal...

Susan: ... And ones that are directed at a lot of people like I told you my friend text me to say 'thanks for asking me out. I had really nice time. Say hi to everyone.' And I showed that around and said 'argh, how cute is she?' Because she hardly ever comes out with us, and umm,... everyone was like 'arr, yeah...' And then there are ones that say... Umm, I can't think of anything. Like [pauses]... Like my friend was telling me that he used to get bullied at school and stuff and like he was saying how horrible it was and like I would never show that message to anyone, which is why I deleted it. But I was still really conscious of...

Jennifer: Yeah, you sometimes have to delete messages like that, that you want to keep but...

Susan: Yeah.

Jennifer: But if they're like really, really personal and you know that they're not going to want other people to know. But you want to keep it and it like shows...

Susan: It shows trust between you.

Jennifer: ...yeah

Susan: That's why I think you should be able to lock them. Just have a password to get into all of your messages, like all of your 'inbox'.

Susan tells of the shared jokes and the 'cute' messages that are passed between the members of larger groups. These seem to be of temporary interest and lose their significance outside of the relevant context. Jennifer puts it like this: "A lot of messages, when you take them out of context they don't mean anything anyway. So like with Susan, in that situation [above] it meant something, but if someone had read it the next day it wouldn't have been the same." On the other hand, Susan refers to 'really personal' messages that signify something of lasting importance between people. These are sentimental objects to be kept, but at times must be discarded because of the mobile phone's inability to lock or hide messages.

This distinction between public and private is important because it confirms that the message, in the form of a gift, is seen as valuable under certain terms and on particular occasions. The message is made private, for instance, through certain understandings between giver and recipient and only shown on occasions when its value is legitimated. Susan describes this: "You can't say 'this is for show and this is for not.' You know, it all depends on the person that gets the messages and the people that hold your phone." The gift can thus only be presented when it is right and proper. "[P]eople" Davis writes (1996, p. 215), "match goods to relationships and the terms of exchange". The value of the gift exchanged – for instance its status as public or private – is dictated by the occasioned ceremony and by all those who take part.

The offerings made through the phone, such as text messages, thus have embodied meanings and these meanings are what enable the assignment of value to the objects of exchange. The text message, the voice call, the offer of a phone, etc. are gifts, in so far as they have value, that this value is connected with the giver, the recipient and the context in which the exchange takes place, and is embodied and retained in material form.

3. Design Suggestions

What we have aimed to demonstrate thus far is that technology, and in this case the mobile phone, serves to mediate particular socially organised practices. In particular, we have considered the practice of gift-giving and revealed that the mobile phone offers various means through which the ceremonies of gift exchange can be performed. These ceremonies, in their various

incarnations, are used by young people to demonstrate ties and allegiances or rivalries among their peers. They have, if you like, become legitimate and morally sanctioned mechanisms through which young people establish and cement their relationships with one another.

By considering these ceremonies and their respective socially constituted values, norms and obligations, we believe we might begin to see what it is about a specific technology or medium that makes it successful (or unsuccessful) in young people's daily lives. In *The Gift* (1997) we find Mauss ask: "What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make the return?" In this question Mauss specifically asks about the obligation of reciprocity, but we might ask the same question about the values, norms and obligations of gift-giving more generally: what is it about the gift, and in particular the mobile phone and it's associated content, that makes it 'work' in the exchange ceremonies that young people perform? The answers to such a question will, we believe, provide one way of assessing the probable successes or failures of future mobile-phone features among young people. With this in mind, in this section we intend to outline what it is about the phone, text messages, voice calls, etc. that make them useful objects of exchange in young people's daily lives. Through this, we will raise some preliminary design suggestions.

3.1 Embodiment

The popularity of text messaging among young people has, it could be argued, a great deal to do with the fact that text messages can be easily assigned meaning and, consequently, value. We are not making the platitudinous claim that SMS messages are composed using text and hence have meaning; it is rather that text messages have peculiar properties that allow them at any instance to be embossed with value.

At the most superficial level messages can be given meaning through the use of particular abbreviations or characters and this may be said to give them their particularly linguistic form: a kind of slang that is in itself valued. In addition, their histories can be made visible through date and time records, and this affords them the meaning associated with a particular historical moment. Sender details obviously afford a third dimension that layers meaning on the text message: just who sends something is not only an index of the text's meaning but also of the participants in the social rounds of exchange and gift-giving of which that text was part. All of these ways of generating meaning are bound up with the processes of exchange and display that we have argued can ritually transform the objects in question from mere communications into

things that have a sacred value: that is to say, as things that are treated as kinds of treasures, looked after and protected; displayed and hallowed; mourned when lost. Thus the idea that texting has ritual properties.

Despite the success of text messaging, there are a number of things that we might propose in terms of enhanced functions by contemplating its role in gift exchange. First of all, and on a practical level, it is evident that the small amount of memory allocated to storing messages on most mobile phones is insufficient to retain all the messages that young people view as important. Young people frequently find themselves having to delete the messages they wish to keep or having to transfer them into some alternative form. Through the former they lose the message entirely and through the latter they lose something of the value of the original message. As it happens, one of the problems of mobile devices is how little memory is available for such information, given that the bulk is used by the operating system. With 3rd Generation devices the load on the memory will only increase. Nonetheless, awareness of this need, may provoke software designers to come up with solutions.

Balancing the data requirement allocation on the terminal itself will not be the only solution. Susan, one of the study's participants, offers another solution to this problem. She suggests that mobile phones should have 'memory cards' that can be 'plugged' into the phone and that these cards might be assigned to different people. She compares this to her own system of boxes for storing things associated with friends:

I keep this thing,...like a box of stuff that reminds me of certain people yeah, and so I have a box for every person, and it would be really cool to have like a memory card for each person so I can put all their text messages in there [and] so I can retrieve them one at a time when I want them.

The idea of using memory cards with mobile phones is, of course, not new. Several phones available on the market already have such a feature. What is interesting about Susan's suggestion is that she sees memory cards not as some technological solution for expanding the phone's memory, but rather as a means to embody her own memories still further. In her view, the cards are thought of as objects in which the memories associated with a particular person can be embodied. Thus, the cards are what Susan later refers to as diaries for each friend from which particular memories can be retrieved and retold. By the same token abandoned boyfriends and

associates can also be symbolically jettisoned when their respective memory cards are thrown in the bin.

More generally, Susan's solution suggests that, in exploring various forms of communication, designers should recognise the importance of the embodied and how objects imbued with meaning support what is after all a basic means of interaction, gift-giving. Designers should thus seek to explore how the different forms of communication and information accessed via the phone might be made to embody significant meanings.

Take, for example, voice messages as objects that might be designed to embody meaning. For young people, voice-messaging services currently offer, at best, a distraction from uncomfortable social moments. It was common during the observations, for instance, to find young people checking their voice messages after class. Such an activity might be seen as a gesture performed to establish a sense of place when confronted with the crowded canteen. At worse, the voice mail service is seen as an annoyance because of its poor interaction design. The young people interviewed spoke of the unnecessary operations needed to retrieve and delete messages. Susan expresses her frustrations like this:

Now that I've got the two phones, my dad sends every... answer machine message to both phones and so I know that the answer machine message is my dad shouting at me because I was out till two on a week night and umm... but I can't delete it unless I call it up and I don't have enough credit to call it up. So I think you should just be able to delete it.... And oh yeah and then they say, "You have three messages. To listen to your messages press 1 ...". Of course I want to listen to my messages. I'm not going to call you up if I don't want to listen to them!

These uses and criticisms of voice-messaging services indicate that, for the most part, the messages are not in themselves seen as valuable and meaningful objects. This might be countered by looking at how meaning becomes embodied through the gift. For what one has with current voice messaging systems is an interaction design that inhibits the use of them as gifts: they have to be called up from remote sites since they are stored centrally (and as an aside this creates costs whenever they are accessed); they cannot be replayed on demand in such a fashion that co-proximate persons can participate in the rehearing; and they cannot be shown either.

The advent of multi-media mobile appliances might provide an opportunity for remedying this situation. Further richness of meaning might be associated with voice messages by attaching still

pictures or video, for example. Designing the phones so that messages could be played aloud and images easily viewed by those close by would also support the sharing of these embodied memories, providing a means for young people's memories to be held to account. In these ways the voice messages might become more tangible; this in turn may allow them to be arranged and organised in more meaningful ways than is currently possible—indeed no such arranging of messages is possible at the moment at all. A key trick here might be to provide sufficient capacity for the mobile devices themselves to store the messages, rather than for them to be stored remotely. Doing so would allow the messages to be used to recount particular histories and recall shared memories at will and without the irksome and perhaps symbolically interfering need for accessing a remote service. In a sense what we are pointing toward is a point-to-point messaging service analogous to a peer-to-peer service over the Internet.

3.2 Ritual

To understand how it is that particular objects become meaningful and significant, designers must make note of the ritual elements that transform value. As we have seen, objects of exchange take on meaning through ritual ceremonies, ceremonies that are often unconsciously performed as part of everyday activities. So the offering of a phone to a friend, for example, serves not only to provide the friend with a means of making calls, sending text messages or playing games. It is also, often implicitly, a show of trust and allegiance. It can also be a marker of status. And finally it can be an indication of commitment—between boy and girlfriend, for example. What is key to recognise here is that meaning and significance are socially constituted through particular activities. In the case of gift-giving, the rituals of exchange provide the essence to this constitution of meaning. Thus, it is not merely the object of exchange from which the meaning originates, but also its role in the ceremonial exchange itself.

This role of ritual in gift-giving has important implications then for mobile phone designers. It demonstrates that the mobile phone and its content are seen to have value not purely because of the functional purposes they serve, but also because of their symbolic meaning and that this meaning is constituted through particular uses of the phone. These ritual uses bestow meaning upon the phone and its content through specific practices and the ordered participation of those party to the exchange. For example, the customisation of a text message, through the use of abbreviated words, smiley faces and “x’s (i.e., kisses), are the ‘wrapping’ of the gift that can imply intimacy or emotional affection. Also, the routine participation in the nightly goodnight messages becomes recognised as a symbol of commitment.

The use of such ritual trappings should suggest to designers that phones and their content should be designed so that they can be made special through practical and ordered means. The mobile phones built to store music, for example, should be designed so that songs can be swapped, yet in such a way that the songs can be marked with personal insignia or poignant mementos, such as still or video images perhaps. These songs might be swapped by placing the phones beside one another so that the ritual of exchange becomes something that can be demonstrated and recognisable to all parties. The practical solution here in a sense is not important in itself, though it should be clear that forcing participants through too many technological hurdles might inhibit the process. (What we have in mind here is that users would prefer a point-to-point solution and exchange as previously described). What should be understood is that by enshrining the communication between giver and recipient in ritual, the object of exchange comes to mean more than its physical and functional features might suggest.

3.3 Obligations of exchange

Foundational to the larger ritual ceremony is the “supportive interchange” (Goffman, 1972, p. 90) of giving, accepting and reciprocating. The mobile phone provides an inbuilt system through which this interchange, or exchange, can be accomplished. For text messages in particular, this exchange is largely unambiguous: a message sent should be repaid in kind and acceptance can be tracked through the use of ‘reports’ that provide the sender with details of when the sent message was received. The parties are also left with physical evidence of both the exchange and the binding agreement that it implicitly or explicitly entails. Thus, all that is needed for the ordered participation in the exchange is at hand. Through accomplishing the obligations of exchange in such a concrete way, young people are able to have clear (and often instantaneous) feedback affirming their ties and social allegiances.

For designers, this not only indicates that ritualised exchange should be a key aspect of mobile phone interaction, but also suggests that features be designed so that the obligations of exchange might be easily met, and met through clear and practical means. Such insight should suggest to designers that the versatility of location-based services, for instance, should not be limited to shunting information *to* users’ devices, but should also pay heed to the matters of gift-exchange and reciprocity. One could imagine, for example, a system that enables the names of nearby friends to be displayed on screen: and indeed, this is something that researchers in Sweden are currently working on (Holmquist, Falk & Wigström, 1999; Weilenmann, 2001). By revealing

your own location you would be able to retrieve similar information from those around you.

Thus, information would be exchanged and reciprocated in kind. Though the practical uses of such a system might arguably be limited, what it provides is the means to meet the obligations of exchange and thus demonstrate social bonds – something that is inarguably of great importance to young people.

3.4 Alliance and Status

For young people, particular phone-mediated actions have taken on standardised and legitimate social meaning. For example, the gifts of a voice call, of call credit, or of a text message are recognised by young people to be demonstrations of trust and allegiance. In different situations they can also be meant as symbols of rivalry or status. For young people the phone operates well in these contexts for two reasons. First, its ubiquity ensures that most are exposed and accustomed to the symbolic nature of these social markers. Second, the phone's overt presence in the normal course of everyday events ensures that the symbolic meanings can be expressed to both the onlookers of an exchange as well its participants.

The performative value of the mobile phone for young people suggests that new phone features should enable the 'public' demonstration of particular aspects of use. These features could aim to demonstrate the social allegiances (or rivalries) between young people for instance. In such a context, location-based services could again be used. One way for a user to demonstrate his or her social networks, for example, could be to have a fellow phone owner's proximity revealed through a pulsating glow of the phone's display. Users could chose to turn this function on or off for specified people in their address books, thereby offering or withholding a gift of sorts. The pulsating display would also be viewable by those nearby and might be customised to reflect defined social groups (in a similar way to ring tones). This feature would thus not only provide a means of cementing the relationship between giver and recipient, but also demonstrate the recipient's allegiances and rivalries to the situation at large.

3.5 Value

Like music CDs, clothes, food and drink, etc., mobile phones provide a means to meet one's obligations to give and the subsequent obligations to accept and reciprocate. Such objects are apt in gift exchange because, as gifts, they are capable of possessing something of the giver. This is all the more true of mobile phones and their content because they are quite possibly one of the few objects of social value that young people have ownership of, or at least have immediate

control over. This raises their value still further, as the object exchanged represents not only something that is personal, but also a symbol of young people's independence. The phone and its contents, if you like, allows young people to differentiate themselves from family or household relations as well as cement their own social networks. The phone allows the young person to withdraw from the world of the home, for instance, and establish a 'micro-world' through the system of exchange that young people employ. Talking about her use of the phone at home, Jennifer puts it like this: "You feel kinda like you have to escape, so the phone's a good way of escaping cause you're talking to different people and you're not like so by yourself." Explaining her reasons for the use of the phone is this way, she later adds: "Life from home and college is so different then you're trying to bring the college home with you."

Thus, for young people, the value of a gift made via the mobile phone may be determined by its capacity to possess something of the giver, to be seen as a show of independence, and to establish a sense of place – "to bring the college home". As we have seen earlier, it may also be determined by the form of the gift itself and the context in which it is given. For the designer, these determinants of value should offer a number of possibilities for shaping the design of particular mobile phone features and functions. Let us consider, for example, some implications for what many of the mobile phone manufactures are touting as the next big thing, mobile 'chat' or mobile instant messaging. It might be argued that to establish a basis for assigning value to mobile chat messages, one solution could be to allow for young people to establish 'chat groups', possibly by assigning people in their address books to specified categories. Like Internet chat rooms, these groups could be made public or private and require different access rights to enter. Phone owners could assign themselves 'identities' through which they could be recognised whilst chatting in these groups. Group and category listings and people's identities might be accessed via alternative media, such as the Web. Access rights might also be shared, exchanged or bid for via the phone or on the Web. Such a solution, naturally requires a great deal of thought, but, we hope, reveals how designers might begin to think about ways in which chat messages might take on value, how their use might help to establish and maintain alliances with groups and independence from others, and how they might be used to sustain a sense of place in a virtual electronic environment.

4. Conclusions

In this paper, we have explained how young people use mobile phones to mediate their social relationships. We have claimed that one way in which they do this is through the exchange of their phones and phone content in socially sanctioned, ritual ceremonies. Looking at young people's phone-mediated interactions as part of the larger practice of gift exchange has provided us with a means to contemplate just a few of the successes and failures of existing mobile phone features. This, in turn, has enabled us to begin to consider, briefly, the impact these findings may have on emerging mobile technologies and related new media. These conclusions, however, should be seen as limited in two ways. First, our aim here has not been to provide final solutions for future technologies. Rather, it has been to show that the social world in which we live has a profound impact on the ways that we understand and hence use technology. It has also been to show that through a critical analysis of this relationship between technology and our social world, it is possible to articulate a number of design principles relevant to specific contexts of use. The design suggestions presented in this paper have thus been made for the purposes of illustration and should be seen as limited in breadth.

A second limitation of our conclusions is that through using gift exchange, we have chosen just one way to interpret young people's phone-mediated, social interactions. In doing so, we have, of course, neglected a multitude of approaches that might also be used to interpret these interactions. Our reasons for choosing gift-giving to orient our analysis were led by what we felt to be the large number of commonalities that exist between the things that young people do with their phones and those characteristics of gift-giving commonly cited in the psychology, sociology and anthropology literature. This choice of analytical orientation raises several possibly original insights into the use of mobile phones, but naturally cannot begin to be complete in its coverage. It should thus be recognised that the work we have presented here is not intended to be a definitive account of young people's use of mobile phones, but rather an in-depth analysis from one particular perspective.

By deploying an analytical orientation based on gift-giving, what we have demonstrated is that the technologically driven models of design, touting visions of wireless ubiquity, always on, anytime connectivity and technological transparency, are quite frankly short of the proverbial mark. These visions neglect to recognise that technologies, such as the mobile phone, are artefacts through which people express themselves and their relationships with one another.

Envisioning the future as a world in which mobile technologies will converge into the transparent distributors and receptors of data bits disregards the role they play in people's social lives. What it dismisses is the fact that people *shape* technologies for everyday, practical purposes and as a means to meet their social (as well as moral) obligations.

We have attempted to illustrate this fact by focusing on the obligations associated with gift-giving. We have demonstrated that under certain conditions and in specific contexts, mobile phones can be used in gift-giving rituals, taking on particular meanings in young people's daily lives. These situated and embodied understandings become intertwined with the technological constraints and possibilities of the phones and, in turn, influence further uses and understandings. The text message, for example, provides the basic ingredients for a gift. As we have seen, between peers and in the right context it may be offered as a symbolic gesture of friendship and allegiance. The constraints and possibilities of the messaging system can be used to transform the message into something intimate and emotionally valuable. The limitation of message length encourages abbreviation and the use of symbols, which, in a way, personally encodes the message for the recipient. The ability to store the message along with the delivery date and the sender's identity allows memories to be embodied and cherished in a tangible form. The technology and how it is used and understood thus become intimately related; each brings its own forces to bear on the other so that no one factor can be seen to drive why or how a technology comes to be used in everyday life.

It is this belief in the relationship between people and technology that has given rise to the underlying theory of this paper. At its core, this paper has argued that common, everyday social practices, as well as technological forces, are what determine the way we understand and use technology. We have endeavoured to illustrate this point by revealing how technologies provide people with a practical means to participate in familiar social practices. Specifically, we have aimed to show that mobile phones enable young people to perform what they see as common sense, everyday practices – to use the rituals of exchange to cement and demonstrate their social networks: that phones have, if you like, provided young people with new ways to perform old rituals. This insight proffers a fundamental lesson for those who wish to see their designs become widely adopted. It suggests that, rather than attempting to radically alter the social world through technological change, greater successes may be achieved through the design of artefacts that aim to operate within the constraints of what we, as social beings, see as normal and common sense practices.

Notes

1. There has, in fact, been some contention over this view that gifts must be reciprocated without delay. Mauss (1977) criticises Malinowski's opinion, arguing that reciprocation can in fact be part of a larger more enduring contract of exchange in which credit and interest are a part (Panoff, 1970).
2. The recipient's reaction may not always be one of gratitude. Feelings of misgiving and suspicion may be aroused from the receipt of a gift (Cheal, 1987).

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