

# New Media & Society

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

---

**Review Article: Future assemblies: theorizing mobilities and users: Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, Jack Linchuan Qiu and Araba Sey, *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. xii + 331pp. ISBN 0262033550, \$29.95 (hbk) Jo Groebel, Eli M. Noam and Valerie Feldmann (eds), *Mobile Media: Content and Services for Wireless Communication*. Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. xxi + 255pp. ISBN 0805858806, \$34.50 (pbk) Mimi Sheller and John Urry (eds), *Mobile Technologies of the City*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. viii + 200pp. ISBN-10 0415374340, \$121.00 (hbk)**

Mary Griffiths

*New Media Society* 2007; 9; 1029

DOI: 10.1177/1461444807082698

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://nms.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>



## Future assemblies: theorizing mobilities and users

REVIEWED BY MARY GRIFFITHS  
*University of Adelaide, Australia*

Manuel Castells, Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol, Jack Linchuan Qiu and Araba Sey, *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007. xii + 331pp. ISBN 0262033550, \$29.95 (hbk)

Jo Groebel, Eli M. Noam and Valerie Feldmann (eds), *Mobile Media: Content and Services for Wireless Communication*. Mahwah, NJ and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006. xxi + 255pp. ISBN 0805858806, \$34.50 (pbk)

Mimi Sheller and John Urry (eds), *Mobile Technologies of the City*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. viii + 200pp. ISBN-10 0415374340, \$121.00 (hbk)

Mobile media and other wireless technologies present fresh challenges for the theorizing of communications policy and practices and for the ways in which the collection of empirical evidence about impact, economics and uses takes place. Since the uptake of cellphones in the 1990s, the global spread of mobile media – mp3 players, palm pilots, Global Positioning System (GPS), third-generation (3G) mobiles – has been exponential, reaching saturation point in some countries. The unpredictability of markets and the changing shape of consumer demands are critical features of accounting for mobile media. Countries differ in their uptake of mobile technology and infrastructure costs and service fees also vary across the world. The trade in mobile metrics is now a growing industry, offering market knowledge on comparative daily usage by

month and by country, ringtone downloads (waning in Europe and the USA), camera phone sales (rising) and the consumption of commercial screen savers (waning and being replaced by self-generated graphics and pictures) (see Mobile Metrics: [www.mobilemetrics.net](http://www.mobilemetrics.net)). A seismic leap has taken place in the spread of participatory, horizontal communications and its impact on social networking behaviour and political power goes far beyond even the potential imagined for the democratizing of internet communications, generated by the rapid and widespread adoption of Web2.0 interactivity. The rise of all forms of blogging and the increase in open file-sharing flag the trend to customized technology practices and user-generated content. The growth in cheaper consumer electronics has led to the flexing of consumer and participant power, triggering a series of battles with some major protagonists in the political mediascape and with global megacorporations as influential as Microsoft, Apple, Bertelsmann and EMI over digital rights management (DRM) music files. Thus the up-and-coming 'mobile web' of internet-enabled connections and user practices adds a new dimension to communications analysis for theorists and applied researchers. Mobile consumer-citizens in many countries now have the means of making media – unfettered, in many cases, by traditional gatekeepers, or professional training and regulations typical of mainstream media. These new producers (or 'prosumers') can distribute content and participate directly in governing its uses.

Ground-clearing work on the histories and research questions emerging from mobile communications has been gathering momentum in Australia (Beaton and Wajcman, 2004), with an international cultural and communications conference on mobile media held in Sydney in July 2007. These are signs that mobile media, as objects of research, are moving from esoteric status into the attention of mainstream cultural theory. Once there, they will adjust existing theoretical frameworks. Subjectivities, virtualities, presence and the invisible software which defines the texture of the everyday and separates city-dwellers into categories, privacy issues, technological innovations, connections to Web2.0, screen scale sizes, media content, the governance of distribution, what counts as a platform, as user participation – everything changes with the addition of the concept of 'mobilities'. The shape of these future formations is not easy to visualize or trace and academic commentary sometimes seems to be playing catch-up to the 'new', as represented by the key drivers of technological mobilities: market-specifics, research, design and user innovations. As the authors of one text considered here admit, 'purely descriptive data may soon become obsolete' (Castells et al., p. 4) and thus flexibility and adventurous scholarly attention is needed to scope the emerging field.

The collected works for review identify emerging issues, combine methodological approaches and theories of technology and offer tentative explanatory frameworks in an evolving interdisciplinary field. All three texts

respond to the complex technological, economic, social and policy developments in mobile media by the deployment of a collective panoptic gaze 'at a new medium'. From the perspectives of sociology and network theory, the first text focuses on providing extensive evidence of the changes made by mobile media to everyday social interactions and assesses the factors which influence uptake and uses. The second concentrates on presenting wireless technologies through the lens of various forms of structural modelling; and the last text considers the effect of mobile and wireless technologies on urban landscapes from perspectives adapted from the disciplinary terrain of urban mobility. Many theoretical, social, political and ethical questions are raised by these constructivist and inventive approaches. The picture which emerges is that communicative power is becoming more horizontal and can be redistributed in new ways, yet it is also more invisible and susceptible to unexpected and sometime restrictive uses; that mobile communication is spreading quickly throughout the world, but that platforms and carriers differ vastly and are changing unexpectedly; that micro-studies need to move away from the types of approaches which were used with physically located and fixed technologies or users; and that narrowcast platforms which are being established will change the nature of what counts to citizens, to youth, to politics.

The authors of *Mobile Communication and Society: A Global Perspective* hail from distinguished research schools: the Annenberg School for Communications in Los Angeles, the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute at the Open University of Catalonia, Barcelona and the School of Journalism and Communication at the Chinese University, Hong Kong. Castells' important and much-cited work on networked society underpins the project. Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qiu and Sey proceed jointly, taking a long-distance, wide-angle, cross-cultural approach, by reporting on and analysing vast sets of research drawn from around the world. The authors are research findings' aggregators, aiming to be as inclusive as the limits of knowledge of different languages and the geographical locations of their synthesizing research permit. Describing the 'standard methodological rule in social science' on which their analytical study of hundreds of secondary sources relies and from which they claim to have identified the 'contours' of a pattern of communication linked to wireless technologies, they state: 'Overall, we believe that that analysis presented in this book is a reasonably accurate representation of what is happening in the world at large' (p. 3). Although they are the first to admit that the work they present is not encyclopaedic, they aim not to be ethnocentric. Research has not been done everywhere in the world on wireless technologies, consequently countries are absent from their work: Mexico and Ghana are included, but not Nigeria. I noted that under the Oceania section, Australia and New Zealand (with two of the higher global penetration rates) are dealt with in two sentences (and, not as the index

shows, two separate sections). This quotation demonstrates the ambition of the project:

to construct an empirically grounded argument on the social logic embedded in wireless communication and on the shapings of this logic by users and uses in various cultural and institutional contexts – an argument whose analytic value should stand by itself. (p. 4)

The central argument is that mobile media is an enhancement of the networked society, hence the term adopted, 'the mobile network society'.

This empirically-grounded, scholarly book is designed to stage an unfolding argument about the logic underpinning contemporary wireless communication. In its mix of indicative instance and summative analysis, the first chapter on diffusion sets a pattern for the remainder of the chapters, which track social differentiation of users by age, gender and socio-economic status; mobility in everyday life; mobile youth culture; the space of flows (familiar ground for Castells); language change; civil society, social movements and power; and global developments, leading finally to the argument that 'wireless communication technologies diffuse the networking logic of social organization and social practice everywhere, to all contexts – on the condition of being on the mobile Net' (p. 258). The assembling of details about the diffusion of wireless communications from selected countries and re-presented graphs depicting the differing 'explosion' rates in Europe, some Asia-Pacific countries and North America, can seem a little scattergun. Still, the detail arising from the selected time period is fascinating both for the potted comparative histories of diffusion developments in, for example, Korea and Brazil and also because, as the facts fly fast, it allows the reader to compare what is happening in their own country with what is happening in other countries. Therefore, the chapter's conclusions do not surprise: there are vast international differences in wireless diffusion and a number of factors are identified as 'paramount': the 'level of development, industry structure and strategies and government policies' (p. 38).

The chapters on everyday life and youth culture are the strongest and they are crucial to developing the idea of transformation which permeates the analysis. These two chapters, by including topics such as m-etiquette, m-government, fashion and identity, the organization of the family and work, politics, the project of autonomy and networked sociability, set out future research possibilities in the field.

The 'personalization' potential of the technology is also a focus of *Mobile Media*, but infrastructure, content, public policy and 'industrial dynamics' are at the forefront of this collection of articles, which were presented first as papers at the Second Transatlantic Dialogue Conference on Mass Media Content in 2002, in Dusseldorf and New York, an event sponsored jointly by the European Institute for the Media and Columbia Institute for Tele-Information.

The editors have tackled four perspectives: models of technology, content, business and policy. The technology chapters all have a strong argument to offer about the impact on users. It explodes market hype about connectivity, convergence and demand. Although the pricing of bitrates and service price is out of date, Timothy X. Brown's chapter on delivery models is prescient about the continuing cost of video downloads and the spectrum availability for multimedia content. The idea that users want 'a device which does everything' is discredited in Klaus Goldhammer's piece on the myth of convergence, and Miriam Meckel and Jonathan Lawrence explore the assumptions about always-on demand and the real limits of interoperability. John V. Pavlik and Shawn McIntosh's chapter, 'Mobile News Design and Delivery', is based on interdisciplinary research at Columbia University on contextualized mobile journalism. The authors present experiments in a new form of 3D 'situated documentary', which allows mobile users to see not only where journalists are standing but also where they are looking. These context-aware, multimedia-augmented reality packages offer choice to viewers, but the chapter's concluding section asks whether everyday consumers, as opposed to specific kinds of public service workers, would want this level of involvement, especially if advertising is intrusive. Although it is an intriguing, limited and early response to investigating the technology requirements of mobile journalism (experiments in the 'situated documentary' mode were conducted not far from campus), this is blue sky research with restricted applicability to the majority of users.

In my view, the provision of context-rich and location-rich information is better illustrated by the variety of content and choice offered online by existing news sources. A striking recent example is the official reportage and broad assemblies of non-traditional, user-generated content on many websites following the shootings at Virginia Tech. It is worth mentioning that video footage from Jamal Albarghouti's mobile phone is yet another milestone in the history of mobile phone-enabled citizen journalism, which has already contributed eyewitness footage to mainstream media reports on September 11, the Asian tsunami, the London July bombings and many less momentous events.

Content-sharing is the subject of Valerie Feldman's thoughtful contribution on the policy issues for peer-to-peer communities. This chapter convincingly argues that file-sharing models, derived from the practices of fixed-line internet communities, cannot be applied to mobile phones. Resources are too restricted: the price of download, interruptions and the 'free-riding' members of communities, who place too heavy a burden on a few sharers, are all crucial factors. Feldman identifies important policy issues: copyright, security and privacy. Feldman points out the ad hoc nature of 'communities', noting that they are often composed of peers yet are anonymous and therefore fragile. She identifies community management as a future role for mainstream media, which could strengthen the comparatively weak bonds of goal-oriented, activity-based peer communities. The BBC is an outstanding example of a

manager of online user-generated content and even acts as a facilitator in building social capital through its Action Network. However, on the mobile content management front, BBC Mobile is offering downloads to individual mobiles and instructing users on how to manage their phones to take advantage of a still-restricted menu. Using a public broadcaster platform to help mobile peer communities establish themselves still seems to be some way down the line.

Yochai Benkler problematizes the question 'what are the copyright implications of mobile mass media delivery?' by arguing that this question assumes a current licence owner and a model of voice communications which is moving to 'a more mass media, bandwidth hungry, high value added service' (p. 193). He contends that future data delivery will be carried also by unlicensed spectrum, on WiFi networks and that it will feature latency-sensitive content (for example, real time voice and video-conferencing), as communication is central to human interaction, not the 'mass consumption of finished products' (p. 193). Benkler sees much wrong with the way that the rights of the 'culture-as-goods' vendors are protected. He registers his disapproval of restrictive US legislation such as the Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998 and what he calls 'the wealth transfers' (p. 199) enabled by, for example, the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act of 1998. He reminds 'toolmakers' that free cultural exchange is in their interests, because the value of all products related to hardware, software, telecommunications and services is being set within exclusive rights legislation. Recent disputes over music file-sharing and DRM material on specific devices have shown his judgement to be correct.

Other essays in the collection focus on micro-issues, such as arguments about the management of spectrum. Spectrum is mentioned throughout, but a chapter of particular note, on access and the challenge of 'free' spectrum, is Kenneth Carter's analysis of the impact of WiFi on the 'walled gardens' of restricted services and the resulting industry dynamics. The conclusion he reaches is that because WiFi lowers the barriers to market entry yet requires significant infrastructure to work as well as commercial networks, oligopolistic markets need to strategize their response to competition in a more complex way. Carter's perspective will be useful for those in the industry; but for users, WiFi can represent not an easier way to participate, but an obstacle to access, because of the initial costs of an individual's participation. In the final chapter, Jo Groebel suggests that 'polymedia' best describes the emerging intelligent mobile centres which will replace convergence on one mobile device; Groebel concludes that what is emerging is an 'option-society', where time and space no longer 'determine what kind of behaviour is preferred, in business transactions, media consumption, work and private behaviour patterns' (p. 250).

*Mobile Technologies of the City* asks 'how are cities being de-materialized and re-materialized through new kinds of urban logics, technical systems and

discursive orderings?’ (p. 4). It is another collaborative work, a collection of papers selected from the Alternative Mobilities Conference, held in Lancaster in 2004, where sociologists, cultural geographers, historians, information studies researchers and urban studies researchers addressed the particularities of urban flow in order to ground their approach to Bauman’s abstract concept of ‘liquid modernity’. Collectively, they aim to describe the ‘emergent practices of physical, informational and communicational mobility’ through actor–network theory which they argue is ‘reconfiguring patterns of movement, co-presence, social exclusion and security across many urban landscapes’ (p. 2). Sheller and Urry use Appadurai’s concept of ‘technoscapes’ to structure the collection into three parts. The first part, ‘Mobilities and the Creation of Urban Spatial Form’, contains essays on topics as diverse as touring Vienna in the 19th century, Liverpool as an e-port and an analysis of urban violence as represented in, freely-distributed BMW films. The second part, ‘Reconfiguring Co-presence’, goes to the heart of the questions raised by mobile virtuality and includes a discussion of real-time mobile timetabling, risk management in terrorism and public health crises such as 9/11 and the SARS outbreak in Amoy Gardens in Hong Kong, as well as an empirical study of the connections between mobility and social exclusion. The third part, ‘Cultures of Infrastructure and Public Space’, develops the theme of the socially productive nature of mobile technologies. Adrian MacKenzie discusses new relations between bodies and technologies in technologized spaces. MacKenzie proposes that a ‘new theoretical abstraction to explain communicative praxis’ might include what it is like to be ‘imaging and acting’ in a Hertzian landscape constructed through technological data. In pursuit of this, he puts forward a new interdisciplinary research category: ‘urban new media studies’ (p. 149). The last two chapters expand the search for an expanded theoretical framework through the lens of engineering and software issues, by focusing on the urban transformations that occur in routine but invisible ways.

Mobile devices, platforms and users must at least begin to alter more traditional media studies’ concepts of new media’s constitutive power. Mobile technologies require genealogical approaches, in order to counteract the ‘gee-whiz, here’s another gizmo’ rhetoric of, for example, the 3G market and the kaleidoscopic effect of isolated case studies. When users can produce their own material (whether it be pictures with their cellphone’s video camera), publish their efforts to a global audience (on Flickr, MySpace or YouTube) and receive instant feedback from other citizen-consumers (through commentary and popular rankings of video responses), it means that media cultures are changing, becoming more participatory, and consequently harder to analyse and perhaps harder to address politically, in the sense that Bruno Latour (2005), has argued is necessary for contemporary relevance. With the advent of phenomena such as mobile TV, mobile point and click barcode

advertising, or locative media which use software to reorganize city life by creating 'permeable boundaries' (David Murakami Wood and Stephen Graham, in Sheller and Urry, pp. 177–91), fresh objects of study are created. Some see mobile media as implicated in surveillance society; others see the benefits of what Castells et al. describe critically as 'perpetual connectivity'.

What do these studies bring to the field? It is more a question of what kind of field is coming into being with the help of these interventions. The authors' arguments engage the scale of mobilities, map them, collect data and questions, reflect on and flag their impact: similar mobile communicative patterns are emerging worldwide and are shaping all forms of social and political relations, which require an extension to 'network theory'. Mobile media have technological possibilities which require attention to the socially constitutive power of business models, policy formation, infrastructure and code. Mobilities, both imagined and material, are transforming the everyday routines of cities, populations and technologies.

## References

- Beaton, J. and J. Wajcman (2004) *The Impact of the Mobile Telephone in Australia: Social Science Research Opportunities*. Canberra: Academy of Social Sciences.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: an Introduction to Actor–network Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.