Mobile Communication in Everyday Life: Ethnographic Views, Observations and Reflections

Joachim R. Höflich & Maren Hartmann (eds.)

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To Santiago Lorente

I. Introducing the Ethnographic View

Introduction

Joachim R. Höflich & Maren Hartmann

The ethnographic view

The mobile phone has become – both worldwide and at an incredible speed – an integral part of communication in everyday life. The quantitative spread alone is a clear marker of this development. Hence the 'importance' or 'meaning' of the mobile can already be detected in the fact that mobile phones nowadays out-number fixed phone lines. There are many possible, but rather diverse starting points for our observations (if we look, for example, at the African continent). This underlines that the mobile and its use have to be read with different cultures and diverse kinds of everyday life in mind. There are, however, also a number of commonalities between the diverse starting points. Katz et al. thus ask whether we can speak of an overarching culture of the mobile (2003:85). Is there an international teenage culture, in which the mobile plays a central role? More importantly, are there cultural universalities – or at least near-universalities – concerning the role of communication in people's lives? If one takes the mobile phone use of young people, there are indeed – on first sight – many commonalities that exist in different countries and cultures, ranging from the Philippines to Finland, from Japan to England. The mobile is especially used to arrange meetings or to reassure one another. When taking a closer look, how-ever, the question arises whether such commonalities appear only on the surface structure and are actually deeply engrained in rather different cultural structures underneath. In the latter case the concrete use can only be understood when it is located within a distinct social and cultural context. This implies the need for a closer look – a look into people's everyday lives, where those aspects that are easily overlooked on first sight actually become visible.

When a medium becomes part of everyday life, it is in certain ways – in its 'everyday-ness' – 'de-problematised'. After initial eruptions, which most media technologies experience before they are incorporated into everyday life, people do not only get used to the medium, but they suddenly cannot imagine living

without this medium any longer. This applies especially to the mobile phone. When a medium is still new, we, as researchers, can more easily approach communicative surface appearances, since earlier communicative practices are changed through a new medium. Such shifts are actually 'real experiments' similar to Garfinkel's crisis experiments – they often bring routine everyday practices to the forefront of our consciousness. Once a medium is a part of the everyday – and the early years of eruption are indeed over for the mobile phone – insights that go beyond the newly established norms of use need to be gained. This, however, is the specific challenge for research that does not want to be fooled by these norms or naturalised uses. This kind of research is usually of an ethnographic nature. It constantly asks the researcher not to be satisfied with what he/she has already understood, but to be repeatedly amazed instead (see Amann & Hirschauer, 1997:29). Or – in the words of Machin (2002:25) – "...ethnography, wherever it is carried out, should take the approach of making everyday life problematic. That means we should never assume that there is anything natural or self-evident in the way that people understand and behave in the world."

In mobile communication research, there are a series of studies that are not only qualitatively oriented, but have explicitly been labelled ethnographic. Qualitative studies – especially when the medium was new – had a special role through their explorative nature, since the focus was on establishing or opening a new field (cf. especially Katz & Aakhus, 2002). To understand qualitatively oriented research as only explorative, however, would be short sighted. Especially ethnographic research has a much broader aim in its methodological basis than simply to perform qualitative research (and it can include quantitative data). Nonetheless, there is often a 'coming together', in which qualitative and ethnographic research is seen to be the same. One can discuss whether studies that are based on this assumption – and this includes those in this book – 'deserve' the ethnographic label. All of the here presented studies do, however, have at least an *ethnographic view* in mind (and this is meant to pacify the critics). An ethnographic view takes a second look and does not only rely on first impressions.

With the advent of the mobile, the well-known home phone has left its fixed abode: the house. It has instead become a medium of public space. For re-

search this implies first of all a wide field of appearances that have to be explained (such as the transition of the boundaries between public and private, the disturbance of a public communication order and the establishment of new communicative arrangements or even just the fact that one is observed during one's communicative activities). Methodically, it allows access to media uses that used to be difficult to observe thanks to their private nature in the house: now one can observe them in public. Hence the observation method has been (re-)vitalised in the research of mobile communication (also in those studies that do not necessarily label themselves as ethnographic). But the observant view is not without its preconditions: one has to learn to observe. This is underlined by the contributions to this volume. Equally one notices that observational methods are often connected with visual anthropology. Until now this was primarily photography, less often film or video documentation. The full repertoire has not yet been applied. Thus far, for example, photography has primarily been used for documentation, sometimes as a methodological addition to the observation in specific places and sometimes as a methodical triangulation. There is scope for more.

One could critically add that an ethnographic view of or onto the mobile phone is extremely shaped by – or even clouded through – its object. The connections between mobile ethnographies, traditional media and communication studies and the already established field of media ethnography are rarely discussed – although this could be fruitful. Media ethnographies have not only already reflected on the question of the ethnographic nature of their research (and the limits of ethnographic engagements in private communication environments), but have often found creative ways of dealing with such limitations. They have found ways to – at least theoretically – combine an analysis of media use in terms of the use of the material object(s) on the one hand and diverse symbolic environments on the other hand.

Qualitative media research (especially in the cultural studies tradition) began with the discovery that the interpretation of media texts is part of a much more complex and larger field of everyday life and thus should be researched as 'only' one aspect therein. This led them to media ethnographies, which offered an immersion into exactly the complexity of the everyday. Soon, however, it became clear that there are many potential boundaries in engaging with people's

private lives. This is one reason why both virtual and mobile media ethnographies are so intriguing, since they offer the chance to observe and engage with the private in public. The original media ethnographies showed both methodological openness and creativity (mostly through combining several methods), but also had to learn that the medium can sometimes disappear in the complexity of the everyday. Within media ethnographies the nature of the focus on media (versus that on the everyday as a whole) is an ongoing debate. Another early discovery – and one that mobile ethnographies should (and have) reconsider(ed) – was that observations are too limited. They tell us – as researchers – one part of the story, but by far not all. Interviews are a good way to include other aspects, but if they are not directly coupled with the observations (i.e. other people interviewed than observed), many things will not be captured in the research. Again, a certain creativity in the approaches will help to get a more complete picture.

The methodological discourse about the ethnography of the mobile phone has thus far been fairly limited. Similar to some earlier media studies ethnographies, the term 'ethnographic' is quickly applied when observational methods are used. How far, however, the researcher needs to take on a rather different role (make him- or herself into a research instrument) and/or begin by immersing him- or herself into the environment that is to be researched and/or other such ethnographic basics, has not yet properly been discussed. Some of the here presented chapters begin this debate, since they at least raise relevant questions (about, for example, the ethical dimensions of certain methods; about the combination of certain methods and/or about the core elements of an ethnography). What they surely cannot provide are all the answers. However, they underline that existing media ethnographies should be kept in mind when the next mobile media ethnographies are being developed. They can help to sharpen our ethnographic views and reveal more – und potentially unexpected – details of people's use of mobile media and their integration into the everyday.

The research field of mobile communication has entered, after a first wave of primarily empirical work, a phase that is characterised through a more theoretical discourse. The main purpose, however, cannot be to 'locate' a placeless medium theoretically. Rather the main focus is to locate this medium in the context of the overall mediated – and non-mediated – communication practices and

as an expression of an overall mediatisation of communicative actions (Krotz, 2002).

Structure[1]

The book is structured into five sections – all of which relate to each other, but still focus on slightly different issues. The first section, *Introducing the Ethnographic View*, includes, next to this short introduction, a further introduction into the idea of the ethnographic view by Joachim Höflich. Social arrangements and the public sphere are core theoretical concerns in the presented research project, which used a set of different and often innovative methods to observe mobile phone use within an Italian piazza.

The second section, *Visualisations*, deals with the role of the visual in the ethnographic view. Inspired – at least in part – by visual anthropology (something also present in other texts within this collection), these three chapters take a closer look at different aspects of the visual. Humphreys raises very important concerns about the role of photos in fieldwork. These are photos made by the researcher, featuring the observed person. Humphreys asks how their use can be justified ethically. Okabe and Ito as well as Oksman, on the other hand, do not use photos they themselves took, but focus in their research on camera phone photos made by the people they researched. This does not imply that questions about ethical concerns disappear. However, the emphasis is here on a change in mobile 'phone' cultures and communicative practices. The interesting results about emerging practices suggest that the next step could be to actively get people to take pictures with their camera phones as part of the research process. This, however, remains a discussion for the next book – and should include the ethical dimensions.

The third section, *Relationships*, focuses on the role of the mobile in relationships. These range from intact family and friendship relationships to differ-

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[1] A special thanks is due to Julian Gebhardt for general content advice and the organisation of the original workshop as well as Enrico Kloth for the layout and graphic work on the entire book.

ent forms of conflict and/or disruption in these relationships. Ellwood-Clayton relates diverse stories of the 'unfaithful' uses of the mobile. Deception and its discovery are her main focus, showing how close the extension of possibilities for new forms of communication and its limitations are to each other. Both, often contradictory, developments are part of the same medium and its emerging cultures. Similar patterns can be seen in Ling's families. Negotiations between different preferences for mobile phone use (e.g. the choice of SMS vs. the choice of voice-communication) range high in these relationships – communicative and otherwise. Gender seems to play a major role, but the state of the relationship (divorced or not, for example) does, too.

In the fourth section, *Dis/Appearances*, we move on to larger questions about the role of the mobile in our changing worlds. Some of the here presented uses are rather unexpected. Thus Lorente shows us that the mobile is not only a communication tool: it can be used trigger bombs, but also to politically mobilise people. Young people were particularly involved in this mobilisation effort in Spain. Young people are also Fortunati and Cianchi's focus. They show that the mobile – at least on the immediately 'visible' level (and in specific circumstances) – is not necessarily a major fashion item (despite the fact that fashion overall is high up on the agenda of these young people). The mobile is, however, highly visible in public life throughout Europe. Lasen has hence focussed her ethnographic view on three European cities and compares mobile phone use therein. There are very diverse levels of appearances of the mobile, which she links to cultural concerns. These diverse levels include the disappearance of the mobile as well – primarily on certain visual levels. Appearances are always linked to disappearances.

Last, but not least, the fifth section, *Ethnographies?*, reflects on how to research (and develop) these emerging cultures and, more generally, on the nature of ethnographic research work as such. Harper and Hodges develop ideas about the emotional expressions and mobile devices. They show that commercial research is pushing new (and rather diverse) developments in this field. Through these developments, academic research is challenged, because it usually gets to research such products only after their introduction – when many decisions have already been made. Hartmann thus asks some questions concerning the relationship between 'purely' academic and other research in this field. She first returns

to earlier ethnographic work in media, communication and cultural studies. This is then used to reflect on more recent experimental ethnographic work located partly within a non-academic environment. Methodological questions come to the forefront, but, as Krotz shows, these are inextricably linked the research questions asked. He argues that in ethnographic research, the researcher should become a research instrument him- or herself. This raises some new (and some well-known) questions. An ethnographic – second – view is only the beginning of an answer to these questions. But a beginning it is.

Dedication

Last, but by far not least, we want to dedicate this book to our colleague and friend Santiago Lorente, who unexpectedly died in autumn 2005. We would hereby like to honour a very special personality with great academic spirit, with humour and a wonderful joy of life. We will always remember him.

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Places of Life – Places of Communication:
Observations of Mobile Phone Usage in Public Places

Joachim R. Höflich

Introduction: mobile communication and social arrangements

The mobile phone has released phoning from its long-term connection to a set location. The household telephone belongs to the old era of 'place-to-place networks': "just as a person used to have to *go* to a specific place to meet someone, a person had to *ring* a certain place to have a conversation with someone" (Geser, 2005:53). Thereby the 'good old telephone' supported social systems that were based more on locations than specific people (as in the cases of offices, institutions, and households).

This has changed. Now, a person can reach others without either party being bound to a particular place. And in the meantime, the mobile telephone has become one of those items that the mobile person has with him at all times. This it has in common with a number of other articles, such as the wristwatch (see Agar, 2003:8). Just as the clock has left its fixed location and can accompany people everywhere, now the telephone can, too – but its use is somewhat more conspicuous than the occasional glance at a wristwatch.[1]

Yet this phenomenon is not limited to the mobile phone. It is much more a part of the mediatisation of everyday life, the harbinger of an all-encompassing 'mobile communication' that ensures availability and access to information anytime and everywhere. This development preceded a privatisation of the previously 'public' media, which were used (at first) in public places (think of the early years of television and its "Fernsehstübchen" – public television viewing halls that existed in Germany in the 1930s – or the telephone and telephone boxes).[2]

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[1] An interesting fact is that mobile phones can – and are – also used as watches.

[2] And even before, in the earliest years of the telephone, there was the "Coin-in-the Slot"-Theatrophone in Paris, that enabled people to listen to performances taking place in the Théatre Français, the Odeon or various varietes; or, based on that model, the so-called Electro-

Indirectly, first as a medium for broadcasting music and then as a medium of business communication, the telephone became a medium of private, even intimate, communication, in which an intrusion from the outside is seen as a threat and always requires a special legitimisation ("Excuse me, I'm contacting you about X") (see Höflich, 2005c).[3] This development is now being turned around again: media are becoming mobile. With regards to mass media, from newspapers to car radios, we are witnessing a development "from stationary to mobile recipients" (Wilke, 2005). If we consider the mobile internet and, of course, the mobile telephone, and its ever-expanding range of uses (keyword: convergence), then we are talking about not only a 'mobile recipient' but a *mobile communicator* in the broadest sense.

When media leave the household (private) environment and move into public space, there are many consequences. On the one hand, their use is shaped by influences in that public space. These range from the spatial structure to the presence of others. On the other hand, the use of the media also has an effect on the public space. This implies that the previously familiar rules of communication are being affected. This is true both for the mobile telephone and for the use of other media. The Walkman, which caused lasting eruptions (see e.g. du Gay, 1997), demonstrated this impressively. Another, although less eruptive example is television in public space (see Lemish, 1982). The following quotation shows how conflicting the public use of media can be (although this quote is referring to television, there is a structure evident here that is similar to that found with the use of the mobile phone):

"When two people sit at a table facing each other, with TV-screens positioned behind each person's head, the arrangements afford an opportunity for easy switching between two roles – conversationalist

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phone, with connections to operas and theatres, installed in the posh Savoy Hotel (see Höflich 1998:191).

[3] To use Lasen's words: "Instead of a growing impersonality of the exchanges and communications, the phone favoured and increased privatism:the participation and valuation of private social worlds as opposed to the larger, public community" (2004:27). With regards to television, see Meyrowitz (1984:68).

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mobile phone, the presence of third parties must be taken into account. This has a strong influence on the telephone situation, as Zelger (1997:213) suggestively describes in the following quote: "Normally with sexual intercourse, as with telephone intercourse, there are two people. Third parties are usually uninvited or excluded from the outset. The presence of a third party alters a telephone conversation just as much as it does the erotic atmosphere."

Moving in public also means being observed by others – and if this being observed is not only perceived, but also observed again in turn by others, then every communicative act is affected by this.[5] In such a situation, a person cannot behave as if he were alone (and therefore unobserved). Rather, this strongly influences the situation of a phone conversation in public. What is being perceived potentially has social relevance and can break into the current communication, disturb it, stop it (see Luhmann, 1999:562). After all, with the mobile telephone there is an "interference of two systems of rules" (Burkart, 2000:219). Who should one try to please? Who should get the attention – the person present or the person on the phone?

Especially in new situations like this, when rules come into conflict due to ambiguities in the behavioural standards in effect, there is a real need for regulation – a new arrangement for communication in public space is necessary (see Ling, 2004:130). Along the same lines (although here encompassing more than mobile phones), Wilke remarks (2005:46): "A need for such a standardisation results from [the fact] that ... mobile communication often takes place in public and is (or must be) noticed and co-perceived by others. This affects the shelter of the private sphere – one's own as well as that of others. This is not problematic with print media, because their reception takes place silently. It is quite different for audio media and mobile phones: in this case, one cannot close one's ears and becomes an unwilling (ear-) witness to communicative events." Aside from the fact that public newspaper reading can also be considered a source of irritation (think of newspaper reading in a train, which creates a problem due to

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[5] Luhmann (1999:561/562) formulated it as follows:"When Alter becomes aware that he is being observed and that his observation is of being observed is also being observed, he has to assume that his behaviour will be interpreted as having adapted to that. His behaviour will be – whether it suits him or not – taken as communication, which inevitably force him to control it as communication as well."

limited space), it is the mobile telephone – or more exactly, the way it is used – that leads to a disruption of the public rules of communication.

The process of developing an arrangement of medial communication has at least been started, as far as the mobile telephone is concerned, although it still has a long way to go. In some areas, the use of a mobile phone creates more of a problem than in others. The following chapter will examine the public sphere, and specifically an empirical study of the communicative events involving use of the mobile telephone on an Italian piazza, to investigate exactly what people are doing with this medium in this space and in their relationships to others.

Mobile communication in the public sphere

The mobile phone represents a disturbance in many respects. Even its ringing, an audible production connected to an incoming call, represents new worlds of sound that bring acoustic challenges, especially when they are at a high volume. Additionally, there is loud talking, or even talking at all where this is normally prohibited. Moreover, other people unwillingly overhear the conversation. Finally, the mobile telephone always draws attention, so that even a silent SMS can be perceived as a disruption. And sometimes it appears to annoy, simply because it is perceived as an annoyance due to someone's personal sensibilities.

Yet, the mobile phone is not disruptive to the same degree in all situations. In a theatre, cinema, church or museum, it is considered much more disruptive than on the street or on public squares (see Höflich & Gebhardt, 2005:147; Noelle-Neumann & Köcher, 2002:451). How the disruptions are perceived is dependent on the normative expectations (Ling, 2004:125ff.) that are in turn connected to the situational activity in question (see Burkart, 2000:221).

At this point, the decisive factor is whether there is a specific or unspecific situation. The former includes concerts, eating out in a restaurant, or funerals, for example. As a rule in these cases, the mobile telephone disturbs because it impairs the performance of a function (i.e. silence is required or only quiet speaking allowed). 'Mobility channels' such as waiting rooms or train compartments represent a special case, when a person finds himself waiting. Usually a telephone conversation is accepted in these situations, although sometimes it is

only tolerated. In situations with unspecific functions, a mobile telephone disturbs slightly or not at all, "because it is not disrupting a particular function and because communication is fundamentally possible in many forms" (Burkart, 2000:221).

Furthermore, one must consider space- and time-related characteristics of the situation (small rooms, crowded spaces, as well as the efficacy of communicative and social rules (politeness or status rules)): Is silence itself required? Can one dare to phone in the presence of certain other parties? Last but not least, the engagement required in a particular situation is important. This refers to the expectation that the user will not simply leave the situation (mentally or physically) but will show a certain interest in the here and now. As mentioned before, sometimes just the use of the Short Message Service can be found disruptive.

Different situational conditions require different arrangements. Nonetheless not all situations have the same relevance for everyone. Dependent on their activity patterns, some people can be found in certain places, others will not be (Human Activity Patterns; see Chapin, 1974); some people go to the theatre, others never go (see Höflich, 2005:161). Therefore a unique knowledge of rules based on concrete situations can be expected.

Yet there are places that are more open, and are frequented by very different people and where a correspondingly wide knowledge of rules can be presumed. Urban squares, as central manifestations of the public sphere, are exactly these sorts of places. What characterises the public sphere then? For Lofland (1998:xv) it is its own 'kingdom,' "one that is inhabited importantly, though not entirely, by persons who are unacquainted with one another:a 'world of strangers' as it were. … Like 'real' kingdoms, the public realm not only has a geography, it has a history, a culture (behavioural norms, aesthetic values, preferred pleasures), a complex web of internal relationships." If a person leaves his private sphere, he not only exposes himself to observation, he also enters a world in which many people are strangers or at least known only categorically (biographical strangers). Although public spaces have a geographically respective physical basis, they cannot simply be reduced to this: "They are social, not physical territories" (Lofland, 1989:11). In this sense they are meaningful spaces, (see also Wilson, 1980); their importance is based on what people do in these spaces and which rules are in effect.

Squares, as the "centre of the city" (Webb, 1990), are the epitome of the public sphere. Squares belong to the urban microcosm. They are part of the interface where people congregate and are also the central places of life and communication. Initially, the designation appears quite simple: "Public urban squares are collective outdoor territories, whose boundaries are clearly defined (e.g. by buildings, gardens, streets) and that are easy to access (e.g. via many streets, alleys, stairs or parks). In this sense, they are places that are closed and open at the same time, they are inviting for lingering and for traversing." (Korosec-Servaty, 1996:534).[6] Every square has its own dynamic and its own identity that identify it as a special social location. Squares are places of communication; they are accessible to all and therefore create the possibility of meetings between people who have not had any previous connections with each other.

A square is also a place where a person needs no legitimisation to linger and – in contrast to some other places – generally signals receptiveness. Yet this happens only within standardised boundaries, because the square is a scene in which the distance between the actors – aided by glances and words – is characterised by showing a polite availability to others (via glances and words) within the boundaries of anonymity marked by each individual (see Korosec-Serfaty, 1996:537).

According to Hans Paul Bahrdt (1969:64), these sort of meetings of individuals as individuals are possible in places where there is an incomplete integration, i.e. where the obligations are not continuous and complete, where people (mostly strangers) constantly meet, come into contact with each other and have to arrange themselves, although they are not always clearly located within a shared system of rules. The spectrum of interaction, in Erving Goffman's terminology, ranges from the mere presence of others (unfocused interaction) to

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[6] A very similar and general definition is found in Webb (1990:9): "Basically an urban square is as simple as a child's drawing: an outdoor room with walls that create a boundary, doors to go in and out and the sky as a ceiling. The walls can be straight or crooked, high or low, closed or open. A square does not necessarily have to be surrounded by a wall. Trees or a low hedge can indicate it just as clearly as a fountain or monument in the middle. The entrances can be covered by arcades or can create an open axis; the ground can be paved or green; the space open or shaded by trees. There are infinite variation possible in terms of size, shape or function."

the involvement with others (focused interaction).[7] In these interactions, people can be either alone or with company. The types of contact with others can vary greatly (see further Lofland, 1998:51ff.). Usually contact is short and not necessarily verbal ("fleeting relationships"). Lofland (1998:53) summarises: "Typically then, in the public realm large numbers of persons, alone or in small groups, find themselves in copresence with large numbers of other persons, also alone or in small groups and have, somehow, to manage that situation" (Lofland, 1998:53). Relationships take on a routine character, when one becomes involved with "categorically known others," such as a salesperson-customer or bus driver-passenger relationship. If an emotional component is added, then these become "quasi-primary relationships" or more descriptively: "emotionally coloured relationships of 'transitory sociablility', which take place in public space" (Lofland, 1998: 55). Relationships with "emotional infusion" are usually very short (such as a conversation between dog-owners or a conversation between people admiring or criticising a work of art) – and not necessarily always positive in nature. In the so-called "intimate-secondary relationships", the emotional component also plays a part but the relationships last longer (examples: older people who meet regularly in a restaurant or café or a 'community' of commuters – a "community of wheels"). Squares, in turn, provide the setting in which these contacts take place. As "memorised locales" they can have a particular (biographical or cultural) value, they can just be a part of the daily comings and goings ("familiar locales"), or they can act as a place where people just congregate or "hang out" (see Lofland, 1998:65ff.).

The importance of a square is determined by what people do on it – notwithstanding the normative guidelines, i.e. the particular rules of behaviour and agreed codes of conduct. Because the public sphere is always a socially normed space, an orientation in this sphere is always a normative orientation – *what am I allowed to do and what not?* Although one never has to pay an entry fee or bring proof that one has the cultural knowledge necessary to use the square, one does have to act according the rules and codes of behaviour of that particular place

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[7] In his words: "Unfocused interaction has to do largely with the management of sheer and mere copresence", while focused interaction is "the kind of interaction that occurs when persons focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talking" (Goffman, 1963:24).

(see Korosec-Serfaty, 1996:532). What happens then to the existing rules, when the mobile phone appears in the events on the square? How does it fit into the square's social events and its existing codes of conduct? Is it considerate of (the social life of) the square? And conversely: how do the social events on the square change?

The user adapts to the place through his daily interactions (acts/activities) or routines, but it is precisely because they are acting that the meaning of the place changes (see Korosec-Serfaty, 1996:534). Thus the mobile phone affects – even changes – the meaning of the place (see Lasen, 2003:40). Once more this creates small (more or less) private spheres – "bubbles" – in the public sphere; "there is a thin layer of private space around the bodies of the people with whom we are sharing non-private space" (Lofland, 1998:12). This can lead to conflicts. This is always true in the case of the public use of a mobile telephone, even if undetached from the specific situational conditions, because people have a very good sense of where the use of mobile is suitable and where it is not (see Weidenmann, 2003:1603). In reference to the use of mobile phones, the square – and specifically in the context of our observational study: the piazza – represents a broad context (frame) for the scope of mobile phone use, and therefore a 'meta-frame' that not only determines the use of the mobile phone but rather is defined by this in a recursive sense.

Observations on the Piazza Matteotti

An Italian piazza will be the subject of a closer investigation of what people are doing with mobile telephones. It is precisely the density of the communicative events that makes the piazza a particularly attractive place to observe. As Marva Karrer wrote: "A person who writes about Mediterranean squares is always fascinated by the communicative density of social processes. Especially the combination of thinking and walking, as Aristotle's Peripatetic students habitually did in Ancient Greece (albeit in that case in the gymnasium, similar to the medieval monks in the cloisters), seems to please the local actors as well as the strangers" (Karrer, 1995:52).

Such density of events is apparent in particular with the use of the mobile phone. Not simply because the mobile phone – in a very short time – has become an essential medium for daily communication in Italy. It obviously dominates public spaces. For a researcher, this offers a particularly chance to observe users *in situ*, without major effort.

More specifically, the square where the communicative events were observed is the Piazza Giacomo Matteotti in Udine, a medium-sized city of 95,000 in Northern Italy. This is a closed square: that is, enclosed by facades with round arches, cafes with outdoor tables and the church San Giacomo (1398). It is helpful to imagine the square as a stage, an "urban stage" (Galli & Imorte, 2002:8) where the roles have not been permanently cast but rather where actors and audience and constantly switching roles (Lennard, Crowhurst & Lennard, 1984:21-22).

Figure 1: The Piazza Matteotti as a stage – with and without people

The image of a stage is particularly suitable for the Piazza Matteotti: the piazza can be seen as (down-) stage, accessed by two steps; there are actors who enter, stand on or merely cross it and 'spectators' standing around it or sitting on the chairs of the outdoor, sidewalk cafés that surround the square. The arrangement of the seats makes the audience metaphor especially appropriate. All of the chairs are set up to face the 'stage'. A central orientation point is a fountain, built in 1543, in the middle of the square that serves as a place for meeting and relaxation for city residents. At the time of the observations, the water had been turned off and the fountain was empty. This made it possible for parents to use

the fountain as a place to deposit their children, while they spoke with others or watched the happenings on the piazza.

Since the mobile phone has enabled one to phone outdoors (disregarding the phone booth), methodological observation has become possible. This was not so easily realised with the phone in the household. There are already a number of very interesting studies, such as those by Rich Ling about the use of the mobile telephone in a restaurant (1998) as well as his observations in public space (2002); ethnographic studies by Ito and Okabe of the use of mobile telephones by Japanese youth (see e.g. Ito & Okabe, 2003); studies by Fortunati (2003), Murtagh (2002) and Okabe and Ito (2005) regarding the use of mobile phones in public transportation and during train travel; Lasen's (2004) observational studies in London, Paris, and Madrid (see contribution in this volume); and finally, Humphrey's multimethodic study (2005) using the methods of visual anthropology (see contribution in this volume). With this study, we hope to add to the body of research on mobile phone use.

First a few explanatory remarks about the composition of this study must be made. The study is comprised of two observational phases in two consecutive years, each lasting approximately one week. The first phase of observation was from 24-29 March 2003. In the first phase of observation, a total of 126 separate observations (of which 36 were female users and 90 male users) were carried out. The first part of the study was decidedly explorative in nature. It was intended simply to find out what people do on a piazza. At first it was undecided which of the city squares should be more closely observed. Based on the city map, Udine's central squares were personally visited. The choice of the Piazza Matteotti was obvious: it is the most central square in the middle of the city. The initial observations were entirely unstructured. To address problems of interpretation or intercultural differences, Italian students who had spent the previous semester as exchange students at the University of Erfurt were present at the beginning of each phase of observation.[8] Gradually a procedure for the observations developed. This was exactly the goal of the first phase of observation: to develop a procedure and ascertain its usefulness, although the procedure should

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[8] Nevertheless it is not a (culturally-) comparative study. The study is much more pragmatically oriented, with a focus on the density of potential observations.