

Becoming Mobile

SMS and Portable Text

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A multitude of uses for SMS have evolved during the short time that the process has been available. At the most basic level, this “short message service” allows the exchange of brief written texts which are sent from mobile phones or via the Internet and received on mobile handsets. As it makes use of existing hardware, text messaging can perhaps be best analysed if it is examined as a series of practices rather than a technology in its own right. As the process has only existed for a short time, the way that people use it is still in a state of flux. However, users are already developing conventions for the medium, many of which are based around the portability of SMS, its unintrusive quality, and its ability to fill ‘dead time’ and eliminate redundancy in language.

The success of SMS also owes much to the increase in text based communication that has occurred as a result of the popularity of the Internet and e-mail. Although the Internet contains inconceivable numbers of photographs, animations and sounds, the bulk of the information that people access via e-mail is written. This has been the first new form of mass communication for many years that has used a predominantly textual form, and it has affected the way people who use the medium relate to written language, and how they produce it.

Walter Ong hypothesised that the introduction of television and radio lead to a secondary orality, where people who had adjusted to written language became more familiar again with the spoken word. In a similar way, the use of e-mail and text messaging indicates the growth of a secondary literacy, with people who use these media becoming more comfortable expressing themselves in a textual form. Text messaging also affects the way

that people express their thoughts because of its brevity – users are forced to express their thoughts concisely because of the 160-character limit the technology imposes. Perhaps because it affects the way that these users express their thoughts, it also affects the way that they think.

By primary orality, Ong refers to cultures that have not yet been affected by written language and the changes it brings to communication. Primary literacy had huge effects, especially after the advent of the printing press which allowed print media to become accessible to far more people than before. Secondary orality became widespread through broadcast media, such as television and radio, which once again foregrounded speech in popular consciousness.

The secondary literacy that has been called into being by media such as the Internet does not have the widespread repercussions of primary literacy, when the advent of radio and television had great impact on large sections of society. The texts being sent by SMS and e-mail that constitute this secondary literacy are primarily person-to-person transmissions, unlike the mass communication brought about by the printing press, radio and television. However, Ong also mentions the telephone as a significant element in the introduction of secondary orality.¹ The telephone was revolutionary in the way that it allowed social functions previously confined to letters or telegrams to be discussed orally, in the privacy of the home. These telephone conversations bear a greater resemblance to the way that SMS, along with e-mail, is increasing the significance of literary texts in contemporary culture. Although these texts can be generated by anyone, and are usually only distributed to people known by the sender, they still hold power. The speed with which e-mail hoaxes and SMS pictures fly around the globe indicates the impact of this seemingly limited mode of transmission.

The convenience of text messaging cannot be underestimated. Its use of existing technology was a great advantage for the medium, especially as it made using that technology more affordable. However, another aspect of the medium's appeal can be found in its 'inconvenience': the effort taken to create messages. SMS provides evidence that in our society where communication is becoming increasingly effortless, there is a desire for media which require skill. So much of new media has focussed on ease of exchange, the almost effortless explanation of concepts and achievement of contact.

However, perhaps the ease with which a call can be made to anyone from anywhere, or a lengthy e-mail be sent in an instant across the globe, has revalued messages requiring more effort. The 'fun' that is associated with text messaging seems related to the time required to input messages, giving senders more opportunity to consider their message. An advantage of the character limit is that it makes this process bearable – repeatedly pressing keys to enter a longer text would doubtlessly prove unpopular. The combination of manual dexterity and verbal creativity required to compose a text message adds value to the process for both sender and recipient.

Text messaging allows private communication to occur in public places. This reterritorialises the spaces that users operate in, and affects their sense of self and home. Voice calls on mobile phones can be limited in some situations because of the need for privacy, but because text messaging is silent and discreet it can be used anywhere. The 'beep beep'

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Through sending messages the way users perceive themselves may change. Users practised in exchanging short texts may feel increased confidence in their social adroitness, even if they are uncomfortable when conversing in person. They are prepared to contact people who they would not dare call, as a rejection by message is far less crushing. The way that SMS users perceive time also changes. This is an effect of mobile telephony as a whole, where plans can be altered at short notice and arrangements deferred until the last moment. However, text messaging allows the user to change or cancel arrangements without the awkwardness of having to speak to the recipient.

Text messaging as a medium carries a dual function. The actual content signified by the message, the issues in the outside world that are referred to, is important. However, a large amount of the meaning in an SMS comes from within the world of the message, and without referral to the outside. The users create meaning in their composition of the message, their use of abbreviation and their manipulation of the character limit. This game-like aspect of the messages is extremely satisfying for both sender and recipient, and enhances the content value of each text.

In his discussion of McLuhan's work, Paul Levinson explores the concept of "remedial media",² forms which function to counter the failings of an earlier process. The remedial aspect of text messaging is part of its appeal. Sending messages allows the user to conduct conversation in a new way, capitalising on the beneficial aspects of mobile telephony, but avoiding the inconvenience of long conversations or awkward voicemail messages.

The way that SMS has evolved supports the view that media are best thought of as 'boutique' practices, which are narrowly purposed. Although it has great value to those who use it, text messaging is restricted to specific groups. The digitised world is so disparate that it is no longer possible to make sweeping statements about the 'effects' or 'benefits' of any particular medium. While a medium may have distinct benefits or disadvantages for one group, it may make no impact at all on other sections of society. The days when the telephone or the telegraph affected entire countries are gone. Consumers now adopt new media in a far more specialised and selective way, choosing a medium which suits their lifestyle and then refashioning it according to their needs. The primary reason that SMS has been successful is that it offers the chance to reclaim text, releasing it from page and monitor, and allowing users to carry out familiar social processes in new surroundings.

NOTES

1. Ong, Walter *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* (Cornell University Press, 1971, Ithaca/London) p. 295.
2. Levinson, Paul *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (Routledge, 1999, London) p. 178-79.