Personal Smartphone Use During Face-to-Face Encounters

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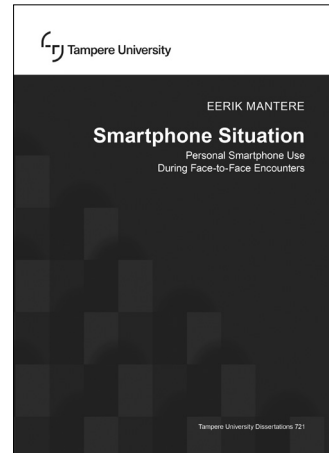
I n 2005 I worked at the Nokia factory in Salo, Finland, assembling the crown jewel of the world's largest mobile phone company at the time: the Nokia 9500 Communicator, a portable phone with a lightning fast 64 kilobyte G2 connection and an integrated keyboard! With such a device young urban professionals, or "yuppies" for short, could take phone calls and keep up with their calendar, even write an email, without ever reaching for their briefcases.

While I was enjoying what I considered to be a steady job, in California, U.S. a completely different approach to mobile communication was being developed—one that would eliminate jobs of everyone in that factory in Salo and turn phones into devices in which both calling and emails form a minority of the activities being done with them. iPhones entered stores in 2007 with lines up to two days of enthusiastic customers waiting for what Steve Jobs called "the re-invention of the phone". Apple got it right and Nokia got it wrong. Clearly it was not only the white-collar workers who wanted such devices, and clearly, they did not want them just for work.

Seventy-eight percent of the world's population now has access to a smartphone, a number that has nearly doubled in the past six years. In France people spend an average of three and half hours on their smartphones every day, while in the U.S. and Finland, the numbers are even higher: four and half hours, and four hours forty-five minutes, respectively.

While this undoubtedly reflects progress, many have started to ask if the devices now play a too elevated role in our lives. Worries have arisen of children who grow up with the devices ruining their eyesight, and teenag-

ers being unresponsive to their parents and teachers.

Research has supported some of these worries, suggesting for instance a connection between child behavioral problems and parental smartphone use, or couples' smartphone use and relationship problems, even partner depression. In an almost Hegelian dialectic of thesis and antithesis these worries were then criticized as mere "moral panic", pointing out that new technology has always been met with fear and suspicion, later found exaggerated.

I wish my work to provide some synthesis, avoiding exaggerated blame or praise of this still relatively new technology, providing observations and knowledge on how these devices feature in our face-to-face encounters, if they are viewed differently than other older forms of media, such as newspapers, and if so, why, and how their presence participates in formation of mutual understanding between face-to-face interactants, or perhaps at times, the lack of it?

I stumbled upon this topic while working as a research assistant in a project with over 600 hours of video recordings of family life in 26 homes in Finland. I went through all the recordings and prepared written descriptions of interactions in them. To my surprise, I saw many situations of parents, not just teenagers, engaged with their devices to a degree to become unresponsive or difficult to engage with. The efforts of some children to gain their parents' participation at times needed to be quite persistent, as parents' responses were missing, delayed, or minimal, and they might rapidly re-engage with their devices, after providing a short reply.

However, I only wanted to describe what interactions in such moments are like, as one might want to describe what goes into preparing a genuine French croissant. I never wanted to blame parents, as I would never want the world to stop consuming croissants, even if upon analyzing its ingredients, one cannot help thinking that it is perhaps healthy to limit their consumption to maximum of few croissants per day.

In the first article of the dissertation, I also wanted to ponder the question of intersubjectivity, or a shared understanding of what is going on. Ethnomethodology, a study of the verbal and non-verbal methods people use to behave in a way understandable to others, and to understand others' behavior, holds, that behavior and situation are inherently linked.

Any human behavior taking place in the presence of others derives its meaning through what is mutually understood to be the nature of the situation. However, any behavior also instantly renews or transforms that very same situation, and the behavior to follow, derives its meaning in relation to what has just happened before.

Sometimes it is not clear what has just happened. In the first article I wanted to study the significance of delayed and minimal participation in face-to-face interaction, when the individual soliciting participation might not know when and to what degree the lack of fluency in their interlocutor's behavior is a sign of dis-alignment in the interaction *per se*, or merely reflecting the fact that the interlocutor is simultaneously engaging with their smartphone. The only analysis of parental smartphone use at that time was based on observational notes of mealtime in fast-food restaurants, concluding that children intensify their attention-seeking behavior when parents are "absorbed" in their phones, but due to choice of methodology, could not describe what interaction in such moments was actually like.

The second article of the dissertation tested a hypothesis that being ignored due to smartphone use, or so called "phubbing", is more annoying than being ignored due to reading a newspaper. The idea came to me

after some colleagues suggested that smartphones are no different from other sources of possible distraction in social situations. My observations suggested otherwise, so I created an online experiment testing this hypothesis with the help of two comic strips constructed on the basis of real-life situations.

The study included evaluation of annoyingness of the situations, written responses elaborating on the differences and similarities of smartphone use and reading a newspaper as sources of non-responsiveness, and a survey section utilizing previously validated measures. I also wanted to examine if phubbing is related to social intelligence by using the General Scale of Phubbing and the much under-appreciated Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale. Not all my expectations were fulfilled. I thought that people who are more annoyed by smartphones than magazines would have higher social intelligence, but there was no difference.

However, there was a very clear difference between the annoyingness of magazine-reading related distraction and phubbing, which was also found to be a strong predictor of lower social intelligence; and the qualitative analysis of written responses suggested, that what I have termed "bystander inaccessibility", or the lack of epistemic access a bystander has to the activities of a smartphone user, played a role in the difference between smartphones and magazines as sources of distraction.

In the third article I wanted to form what I had come to think of as important typological and conceptual basis for analyzing smartphone use in face-to-face encounters with conversation analytic methodology. I wanted to find a way to efficiently describe the changes in engagement with smartphones that participants in social situations may undertake, because without such a toolkit, I felt the capacity to thoroughly examine the signifi-cance of changing smartphone engagements was limited, especially in group interactions.

I recognized 13 embodied user-smartphone positions that frequently occur in such situations. They are based on the smartphone's location, the direction of the screen in relation to the user's head or a surface the phone is resting on, and the relation between the user's hands and the smartphone.

Defining these positions, like TableUp, when the smartphone is on the table screen pointing up, or BothHands, when the smartphone is being held by both hands while the screen is pointing towards the head of the user, made it much easier to analyze how the exact moments when the user-phone position changes, plays into the face-to-face interaction, and helped to discover how smartphone moves from one position to another, can participate in interactive events like ending a turn at talk, holding onto speaker position, or suggesting a change of priorities between personal smartphone use and face-to-face interaction as main involvement or side involvement in the situation.

It is clear that smartphone use in social situations is not a dichotomy of either using the device or not. Subtle modifications, such as intensifying smartphone engagement by placing also the second hand on the device, which was previously held only by one hand, are seen as a slight move towards a disengagement from the face-to-face interaction, as it is a move which re-allocates more interactive resources to be available for, and oriented towards, the face-to-screen interaction rather than face-to-face interaction. I hope this work to also re-vitalize more focus on engagement in general in conversation analysis, as I feel there has not been enough new developments since the classic works of Goodwin and Schegloff.

So, did the world become a better or a worse place because people prefer engaging

with truly multi-use iPhones rather than work-focused Nokia Communicators? My research was not exactly designed to answer that question, although based on the literary review of the introductory section, and the overall impact of social media, one might be inclined to answer the latter. However, such guessing games are not useful. Smartphones are here to stay, and other mobile multi-use devices like connected augmented reality goggles are well on their way. What I believe is useful, is to recognize how smartphones are used, and can be used, in face-to-face settings, and how people react to them.

Based on the research in this dissertation I also believe it might no longer be correct to frame smartphone use in social situations primarily in terms of smartphone addiction, as has previously been the case in phubbing research. Firstly, phubbing as a concept is severely lacking, as it was actually developed by a marketing company trying to convince people that new words merit a purchase of a new dictionary, apparently even when those new words are invented by the people themselves who are selling you those new dictionaries.

It was also precisely designed to be moralistic and provocative, though there are many ways of unproblematic smartphone use in social situations as well. Secondly, the connection of phubbing to social intelligence might be equally important to that of smartphone addiction. People who use smartphones in social situations in ways that others disapprove, might be addicted to their phones, but they also might just lack the social awareness and social information processing capacities to realize the impact of their behavior on others.

We might also at times enact some engaging smartphone moves without being fully aware of what we are doing. Perhaps the best way to prevent phubbing related conflicts would be a combined training program of social intelligence and mindfulness fo body, as previous research suggests that both can be trained. The smartphone positions and smartphone moves depicted in Article III could be useful resources in building such a program, and schools and other institutions could benefit from offering it to students, staff, and clients.