The mobile phone: gadgets and play

From Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly 2009 *New Media: a critical introduction* (2nd edition), London: Routledge, pp. 252-253

Hello kitty!

Over the past decade the status of the mobile telephone (or cell phone) has shifted from that of a rather exclusive communication device to being the near universal augmentation of children's and adults' everyday existence in the developed world. For example in 2003, 88 percent of 15–34-year-olds in Britain owned a mobile, and by 2006 91 percent of 12-year-olds had their own phone (Oftel). By July 2007 there were nearly 100 million mobile phone users in Japan (Daliot-Bul 2007: 968). While these statistics apply to the postindustrial world, it should be noted that the mobile phone has been widely adopted in developing countries. For example in rural areas of some African countries mobile networks and mobile phone ownership far outstrips landline networks. In Kenya the number of mobile phones was one million in 2002 but grew to 6.5 million in 2007. The number of landlines (around 300,000) did not change in this period (Mason 2007).

The mobile has been 'decoded' by a generation of teenagers, who have at once bought into the producers' dreams (coveting particular brands for example) and generated new communication practices such as text messaging. The ways in which texting has been adopted, and the kinds of message sent, represent a genuinely new communication medium in everyday life. The technical limitations of the keypad have proved to be not so much a constraint on texting's potential as facilitating a new vernacular shorthand of everyday communication. The incessant development and sale of new ringtones, games, and display graphics is a familiar consumer capitalist strategy of selling us new commodities we never knew we needed, but at the same time seems inseparable from other new media practices such as the customising and personalising of computer desktops or online services. Jean Baudrillard, taking an earlier mobile personal communication device, the Dictaphone, as an example, highlights the uneasy status of the technological in a consumer culture:

> whisper your decisions, dictate your instructions, and proclaim your victories to it ... Nothing could be more useful, and nothing more useless: when the technical process is given over to a magical type of mental practice or a fashionable social practice, then the technical object itself becomes a gadget (Baudrillard 1990: 77).

He is less interested in exploring what the nature of everyday experience might be with these gadgets, what sensual and aesthetic pleasures might attend ludic gadgets and the play with communication they encourage. In an article which documents the tremendous variety of playful and creative uses to which young Japanese people put their mobile phones (in Japan, *keitai*), Michal Daliot-Bul suggests ways in which attention to playful media consumption demands that we rethink the boundaries of and within everyday life:

> Hanging a Hello Kitty charm on one's keitai, playing a simple cell phone digital game or having an animated character hosting one's keitai mail room are all acts of 'deviation' from reality into a play-dimension [...] Keitai blurs the distinction between the private and the public, leisure and work, here and there, and virtual cyberspace and reality. As this happens, the boundaries of play as a framed act separated from real life blur as well (Daliot-Bul 2007: 967).

If popular media technologies are only ever symbolic and 'textual' and never practical or instrumental, then they may well be these gadgets of Baudrillard's. For Baudrillard tools and machines in contemporary consumer culture lose their instrumental functions, their practical uses, their use value. They instead operate as signs, fashion, toys or games. Digital personal organisers, text messaging on mobile phones, mobile phones themselves, may be sold as useful tools – but all seem to invite us to play. After all, who felt the need to 'text', to change a PC desktop's wallpaper or nurture a Tamagotchi virtual pet until a consumer device suggested we might?

Baudrillard's assertions, on the one hand, illustrate the logical conclusion of the argument that popular technologies are 'textual' and, in themselves, have no causal or instrumental function in everyday use: we are only ever playing at doing things, at performing useful tasks. On the other, his definition of a gadget as a 'ludic' device, a technological artefact with which we play, is a suggestive one. It asks us to consider what the significance of playful technology might be. The mobile phone user's weaving of spoken and written communication through the spare moments of the day may not be 'instrumental', but neither is it reducible to 'fashionable practice', nor to the decoding of Nokia or T-Mobile's marketing strategies. It suggests that much everyday communication is non-instrumental, playful, about making connections and eliciting a response, regardless of the content of any particular message. For Daliot-Bul, texting is primarily phatic communication, 'used for maintaining social contact and conveying feelings rather than exchanging information or ideas. It creates a playful and emotional connectedness among friends. It is about *feeling* and *reaffirming* the connection' (Daliot-Bul 2007: 956). As the charm of Hello Kitty suggests, the distinction between the consumption of technologies as instrumental use and as play is not always easily drawn.

References

Jean Baudrillard 1990, 'The gadget and the ludic', in *The Revenge of theCrystal: selected writings on the modern object and its destiny 1968-1983*, London: Verso
Michal Daliot-Bul 2007, 'Japan's mobile technoculture: the production of a cellular playscape and its cultural implications', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol.29(6), 954-971
(Note: 'Ludic' means playful or game-like)