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Hidden histories of mobile media

Erkki Huhtamo

Erkki Huhtamo is a Finnish media scholar, curator and writer. He lived in Turku before joining the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), where he is currently working as an Associate Professor of Media History and Theory at the Department of Design/Media Arts. He has lectured and published widely on media archaeology and media culture, curated media art exhibitions and directed media culture television programs. For *receiver*, Huhtamo links current uses of mobile communication devices to some of the historical points on which media developments abandoned fixed location.

Huhtamo's site
http://www.erkkihuhtamo.com

Look for words like "mobile", "portable", "wearable", "nomadic" in any standard media history. Be ready for a surprise: they are not there. Or, perhaps it wasn't a surprise, after all: for more than a decade we have been told that the devices most of us practically live with – mobile phones, PDAs, pagers, Gameboys and iPods – are something quite unprecedented. Their appearance was like a forza del destino – it just had to happen. So why should it surprise anyone that the story of their emergence is largely missing from the pages of the history books? Even Marshall McLuhan, who saw the media as "new extensions" of the human being, had little to say about mobile media.

So media archaeology faces another challenge. If these things are really so new, does it mean that we have finally encountered the rupture that will tear media history apart, condemning the first half into obsolescence and oblivion? Surely, other candidates have emerged before. Less than two decades ago virtual reality was hailed as the "medium of the 21st century" – until it was proven to be just one of the many waves of virtual realities (including the Victorian "stereoscomania", the stereoscope craze of the 19th century) that appear from time to time. And the Internet had not yet come of age, when Tom Standage published a book called the "Victorian Internet", pointing out that although amazing, it wasn't, after all, so totally different from what had happened already during the heroic era of the electric telegraph in the 19th century.

The mobile media, so it seems, are something different: a real breakthrough both as a technology and as a social and cultural phenomenon. A media archaeologist, however, cannot be content with such statements. He keeps asking: where did mobile media really come from? How were they moulded

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within other cultural practices? How did fantasies about mobile communication come to be embedded in real devices and institutions? The task is nothing less than uncovering the "hidden" histories of mobile media – to the extent that they existed, that is.

Such an undertaking forces us to investigate phenomena that may at first look to have little to do with media and communication. An example: the wristwatch. There is a wonderful story according to which this now ubiquitous device was invented in Paris by Cartier in 1904 for the Brazilian aviation pioneer Santos Dumont, who found it difficult to check the time from his pocket watch while steering his aircraft. The association between transportation and body-mounted time-keeping is evocative, also because it anticipates the union between mobile media and the automobile.

In reality, the wristwatch had been invented decades earlier, but its popularity grew slowly, because it was considered feminine, much like a bracelet. The men preferred pocket watches they could attach to their belts or hide in specially designed pockets. It required the fame of Cartier, the masculine, technology-saturated profile of Santos Dumont and a little later the testimonies of soldiers fighting at the fronts of the Great War to break through the gender barrier, to become the indispensable technological annex to the body it has been ever since.

Although strictly speaking not a "media machine", the wristwatch is not unrelated to mobile media. When David Sarnoff, the pioneer of radio broadcasting, envisioned the portable radio in 1922, he used the watch as his reference. According to Sarnoff, the portable radio should have as its ideal "the watch carried by a lady or a gentleman, which is not only serviceable but ornamental as well." His idea of the portable radio as a personal utility, which is both useful and neatly designed, resonated within media culture. Indeed, the St. Louis jeweller J.A. Key soon introduced a radio set modelled after the pocket watch, and even a radio "pinkie ring" was proposed by another inventor.

In the 1940s Chester Gould's comic strip hero Dick Tracy wore a voice-activated videophone looking like a wristwatch, a device which evidently influenced a wrist-mounted radio designed for the US Marine Corps during the Korean War in 1953. In the 1960s the famous shoe phone used by Secret Agent 86 Maxwell Smart (Don Adams) in the cult TV-series "Get Smart", as well as the fantastic cigarette box and pen communicators utilized by the "Men From U.N.C.L.E." reminded us about the intricate

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relationship between the fantasies and realities of mobile media. When it comes to mobile "spy-tech", the influence has gone in both directions, from realities to fantasies to realities and back again.

One of the first forms of mobile spy-tech were the candid cameras of the late 19th century, imaginatively disguised as hats, walking sticks, bags, and – yes – pocket watches. Sometimes these devices, such as C.P. Stirn's "Concealed Vest Camera", were hidden under the user's clothes, shooting through a button-hole. Used both by authorities and (more or less) "normal" camera enthusiasts, such devices were in a sense a reaction to the extremely bad reputation gained by the ubiquitous amateur snapshot photographers, often acting in groups and organized in camera clubs. They were the (proto-) "smart mobs" of the time.

This issue is worth some reflection, because it may give us clues about the public passions currently raised by devices like mobile phones. As it happens, the contemporary attitudes towards the amateur photographers roaming the streets and populating the beaches with their easy-to-use box cameras were far less rosy than the histories of photography would like to have us believe. Indeed, there were frequent complaints about "The Camera Epidemic", referring to the ways in which the amateurs were felt to be transgressing existing social rules, particularly those related to privacy and decency.

Amateur photography was accused of being "one of the perils of life", while snapshots were said to add "yet another to the terrors of modern existence". There were frequent calls for legislation that would limit the rights of photographers to snap pictures of unsuspecting or unwilling subjects. Interestingly, women were often accused of being at least as ruthless and cruel as men in their determination (that sometimes developed into obsession) to use their new mobile media machines for "hunting". Of course, their "fight for the right to snap" can be read as a sign of emerging female emancipation as well.

Parallels between the late 19th century "photographic pest" and the early 21st century mobile phone user cannot be drawn without qualifications. Mobile phone users rarely deliberately disturb their surroundings, merely exercising their "right" to lead mobile remote existence with their business-partners or their loved-ones wherever they go. Yet it cannot be negated that the sudden massive presence of mobile phones in public spaces has raised ethical and social issues surprisingly close to the concerns about snapshot photography.

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Once more, one's right to a certain amount of privacy, even within the public sphere, is being called for, and its transgressions protested at. Do I have to listen to ring-tones and other people's private discussions, although I don't wish to? The discussion concerns the nature and ownership of public space, from the means of public transportation like buses to those transitionary urban venues defined by Marc Augé as "non-places". Should one resort to legislation, or simply grin and bear it for a moment, accepting the idea that any new media practices are controversial at first, but gradually become "automated" – invisible and inaudible?

Although mobile phone use no longer raises such loud voices of protestation as some years ago (perhaps partly due to the growing popularity of silent use modes such as text messaging), camera phones may well be in the process of re-activating the 19th century debate, perhaps more loudly than before. Where the early candid cameras were clumsy to use and often easy to detect, the camera phones can be brought and operated practically anywhere. They are easy to smuggle into concerts where photography is strictly forbidden; they can be slid under young girls' skirts, as some Japanese evidence shows. What's more, the images can be instantaneously uploaded on a dedicated fansite or inserted into a weblog. Trashing the camera has become useless as a counter-measure.

Of course, such negative visions are only one part of the story. Although they may have a real basis, they can also be triggered by psychological resistance to new media. The creative impulses unleashed by amateur photography should not be underestimated, even if they may at times have run counter to the prevailing values and codes of behaviour. Likewise, camera phones are opening unforeseen possibilities for both self-expression and inter-personal communication. Whether this may be allowed to happen free of any social and institutional constraints has to be debated within the society itself. Media archaeology can help by revealing the wider historical context for such debates, although it provides no definite answers.

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contact: erhuhta@ucla.edu

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