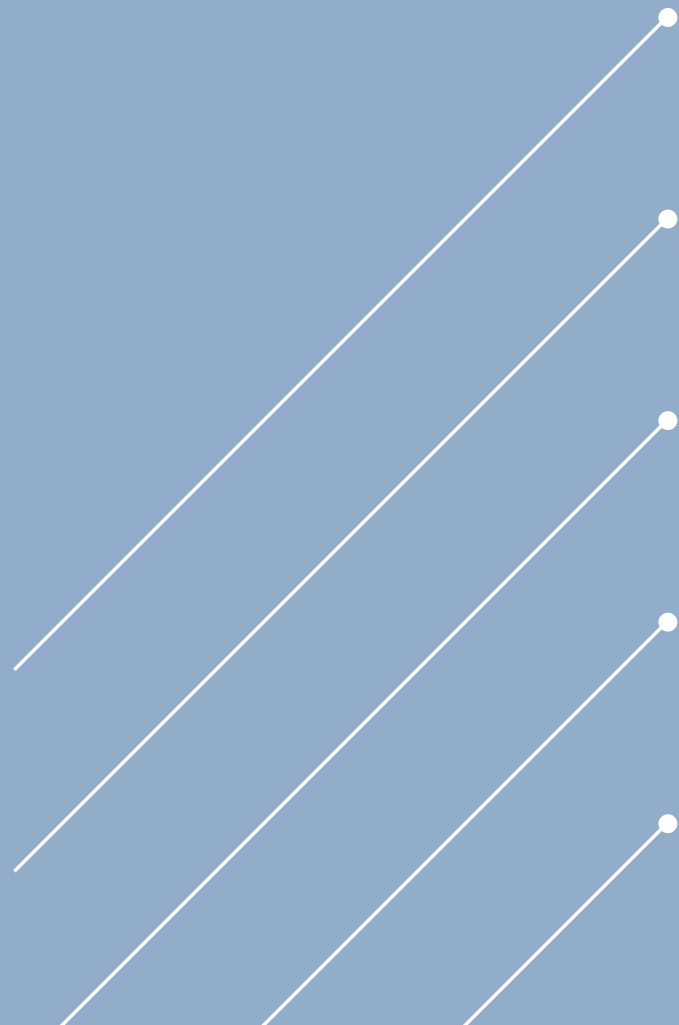


THE RISE OF THE MOBILE SUPER USER

by Will Harris



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INTRODUCTION TO WILL HARRIS

As a student, Will briefly had a job selling mobile phones one summer. The phones themselves cost £1000, the call charges were £1 a minute and they came with a mandatory 2 year contract. He sold only one.

After University Will entered the world of advertising, and in 1994 started working on a small unknown start-up mobile business that was to be called Orange. For the next five years, he was responsible for all the Orange advertising that shaped that brand.

After a few years working for BT's mobile brand Cellnet, and on their mobile internet fledgling Genie, Will changed sides and joined BT as Global Marketing Director for Genie. In the next year, Genie was launched in eleven countries around Europe and Asia.

When in July 2001 the decision was taken to re-brand all the BT Wireless properties, Will was asked to lead the work. After a great deal of arm-twisting and hair-stroking, too many airline meals and only the occasional sense of humour failure, O2 was launched in May 2002. It has flourished from day one.

Apart from a short (and disastrous) foray into politics, Will has stayed more or less in mobile. He ran an advertising agency for a couple of years (with several mobile clients), was CMO for mobile VOIP start-up Rebtel and in November 2007 starts at Nokia UK as Marketing Director.

Will is 38 and lives in London with his wife and two small children. At this point he can't think of a witty way to end this piece, but is sure he will soon.



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THE RISE OF THE MOBILE SUPER USER

by Will Harris

Preface

Has there ever been a more under-estimated invention than the mobile phone? We've all got them. We all use them. In survey after survey we profess that none of us could live without them.

Yet where are the statues to the pioneers of mobile? The tributes? The rows and rows of worthy tomes annotating and describing the impact of the mobile phone in our society? The British Library, keeper of every single book ever published since year dot, returns precisely 40¹ books from an online search on 'mobile phones', 17,348 for 'Television' and 26,832 for 'Internet'. The Library of Congress is no better.

Were we to stop and think for a moment, we would see that the mobile phone has already changed our lives dramatically and irrevocably. Our 'civilised' society could not function as it does today without mobile phones. The first thing governments do in a crisis is shut down the mobile networks. They knew the power they provide us with, but do we?

Part of the reason for this general under-appreciation of the impact of mobile is because we are still in the dawn of the technology. As a mass communications device, the mobile is rarely more than about a decade older in any country, and that's too soon to make a proper judgement about its impact. That much can learn from looking at the impact other technologies made.

¹ Top of the list is Ian Atkinson's [Advance Linear Predictive Speech Compression at 3.0 kbits/sec and below](#) which gives you some idea of the nature of the rest. I haven't yet read it.

But the second reason is perhaps more interesting, and less predictable. The people who write history aren't necessarily the people who make it. They write things the way they see them, and when it comes to mobile, they have broadly missed the point.

There is a sub group of mobile users who most definitely haven't missed the point. People who use the phone in a different way to that which it was intended. We call them Super Users, and they have re-purposed the phone for their own ends. For them it is not primarily a mechanic for speech anymore.

If you're not a mobile phone Super User, you're just a mobile phone User. Users still use the phone primarily as an instrument for talking; like a fixed phone but without wires. Unfortunately Users write history.

Super Users conduct their lives in an entirely different way to Users. They have different values, beliefs and attitudes to Users. They even flock together, preferring the company of other Super Users to that of Users.

If that's not alarming enough, the digital world is about to change again as mobile and Internet collides. The Users haven't told you that have they? They call it convergence.

It's going to be a seismic shift with winners and losers. Worse still, the 'traditional' online rules won't work in this space. The only law that matters is the law of the Super User.

This pamphlet is all about Super Users today and tomorrow, and how they will own the next stage of the mobile Internet. It's going to be an exciting next five years, with radical change for how we work, rest and play. Super Users are part way there already.

PART I: AN INTRODUCTION TO SUPER USERS

Mobile phone: hero or villain?

Of all of mankind's modern inventions, can anything divide people's affections more than the humble mobile phone?

For some it's the annoying chirp that wrecks the tranquillity of the romantic dinner for two, a source of constant irritation in the classroom as fingers that should be otherwise engaged, are busy tapping out text messages. At work it's a disrupter of solemn soliloquies around boardroom tables, or the call that comes in over the weekend from your boss that you just can't ignore. For others mobile phones are the heir apparent of cigarettes, asbestos and DDT, another everyday killer lurking in the shadows of our modern lives. It's fair to say that not everyone is a fan of the little bundles of plastic and wires that 2 billion of us routinely carry in our pockets and purses.

Others have a more enthusiastic view. They see mobiles as an indispensable part of modern life, and think our very existence would be much the poorer without them. They embrace mankind's newfound ability to cheat geography, and speak to almost anyone on the planet at any time. Others marvel at their instant buzz of sending and receiving private messages that no-one else can read, that show up for a few cents, only a few seconds later. An increasing minority are also beginning to explore the limitless potential of the Internet on their mobile device, and revel at the unchaining of the wonders of the web from the bulkiness of their PC. For anyone under the age of about 14 in the developed world, a world without mobiles is unthinkable, reminiscent of an era before cars, TV and refrigerators.

This pamphlet has a distinct and certain view. It takes as its premise the principle that the mobile phone is the single biggest technological advancement that we will see in our lifetimes. Put

simply, mobile phones are agents for change, and that change is overwhelmingly positive. Some technologies have been as popular and widespread, other technologies have encouraged change in specific sectors or niches, but for epoch-making, mass adoption and mass improvement no other technology has so radically improved how people live, all over the world, since the industrial revolution.

It will make this case first by looking back at the decade of change mobile phones have forged in western society, and demonstrate why we are indebted to mobile. Then it will look forward three to five years to the next phase of change that is almost upon us, which will render all that we have seen so far as mildly inconsequential. It does both these things using a unique new segmentation called the Super User Segmentation, which identifies Super Users as the change makers, the influencers of this social progress.

Super Users have taken an obscure back-channel function called the Short Message Service, and turned it into a communications nirvana. Originally the preserve of the engineers who needed to report back on the efficiency of the network without disrupting the voice traffic, SMS has become the lifeblood of Super Users who now live their lives in a web of constant contact and connectivity. The frequency and nature of this contact has conditioned these groups to such an extent that they have begun to exert an influence over the rest of society. As the number of Super Users swells, so does their influence. The changes in society they impose become more and more apparent.

If you make it through this short pamphlet (and it's written with the intention that you will) at the very least you will be left wondering why something that is so ubiquitous, the 2 billion mobile phones in our pockets, has received so little attention and credit as an agent of social change. At best, you'll be left

wondering just how your business is going to cope with the new world that is just round the corner. The absolute ideal is that you will take the Super User definition to heart, and suitably armed, you will thrive in the new mobile world that is almost upon us.

It's like fixed, but without the wires, right?

Detractors of the mobile phone make the mistake of assuming that a mobile phone is exactly like a fixed phone, but without the wires. They lump the two together, and discounting one, they discount the other. This may well have been true at its incarnation, but events have moved on since then. Mobile phones play an altogether different role to fixed phones, and serve a much more noble purpose. The fact is that mobile phones have evolved from their original intended remit.

There is much precedent here. Most inventions quickly find fame with a purpose other than that for which they were originally conceived. Thomas Edison's heroic efforts to build a phonograph, which he finally achieved in 1877, were not in an effort to bring music to every household in America. He set out to build a machine that could capture sound, and having successfully done that, he wasn't quite sure what to do with it. He drew up a list of ten things to do with it, and his top three were recording the last words of dying people, announcing the correct time and teaching spelling, none of which had quite the mass appeal of what has become the iPod.

If you discount Viagra (originally designed as a heart drug), penicillin (the result of poor hygiene in the laboratory), the microwave (the most humane way of re-heating frozen hamsters in a 1980's cryogenics experiment) and Roquefort (an old cheese sandwich left in a cave by a shepherd up a mountain) then the telephone was one of the greatest beneficiaries of this evolution of use. Indeed we can learn a great deal about the

misinterpretation of the mobile phone, from the trials and tribulations of its wired ancestor.

Introducing the fixed phone

Despite the fact that the device he invented is still in use all over the world today, there is surprisingly little written about the life of Alexander Graham Bell. He spent his adult life working with deaf people, trying to understand the science of speech in order that they may themselves be able to speak. It was this grounding in the patterns and manner of sound that enabled him originally to conceive of transforming speech to vibrations that could travel down wires.

Like so many inventions, he was working on something else when the idea of a speaking telegram came to him. As part of his work with deaf children, Bell was interested in devices that visualised sound waves. The idea was that if one could visualise the sound of normal speech with a series of marks on a piece of glass, deaf people could compare the sound that their own voice patterns made and train themselves to replicate the sound. The process required the transformation of sound to a visual pattern, and in itself may not have gone much further, were it not for his other project, his work on the telegraph. For some time Bell had been working on an improvement to the telegraph of his day, which was in effect one long wire through which a connection could be opened and then closed in the form of Morse code. Messages had to queue until the line was free, and the only solution was stringing more and more lines between places. Bell had invented a way of breaking this log jam by sending multiple messages down the one wire, by using electromagnets at each end and he rushed to patent the idea.

Legend has it that he was sitting by the side of the river listening to the sounds of nature when he put the two inventions together. Where he was doesn't really matter; by fusing his ability to

transpose speech to pulses, with the principle of sending electric currents down wires for great distances Bell invented the telephone, at least at a conceptual level. Working with Thomas Edison he managed to turn the dream into a reality by building a machine that transmitted speech down wires, successfully applying for a patent in the US just hours ahead of a rival.

Unlike many founders, Bell decided that inventing was what he was good at, and that running the business was something that could be left to others. So while the business managers began to build up the company that would eventually become AT&T, Bell left them to it and continued with his career as an inventor, still working with the deaf. He also invented or improved designs for the Iron Lung, the Hydrofoil, aeroplanes and tetrahedral kites. When not demonstrating his telephone to various scientific conventions and mass public gatherings, he also found time to co-found the National Geographic Society. By this stage he was a very wealthy man and died in 1922, aged 75. As a mark of respect, on the day he was buried all the phones in North America fell silent for a minute. All this and not a decent biography of him to be seen.

How the telephone is used today bears very little resemblance to how Bell or any of his contemporaries would have envisaged. It was felt that 'casual conversation' was not a worthy use of such a high-minded scientific instrument, and indeed it wasn't until after the First World War in the US that it began to be used in the way it is now, as a casual means of communication. This was some forty years after it's invention. Most of the running was made in the US; while Britain was still the centre of the Empire and industrial powerhouse of the world, it seems that there was an innate conservatism that preferred good old-fashioned telegrams and even the Royal Mail for communication in the UK.

In those early years whenever the telephone was demonstrated in public, the process seemed to be the same. One end would be set up in front of an audience and the other some distance away. Bell or whoever was representing the company would disappear from view, and then his dismembered voice would be heard, normally reciting Shakespeare (Hamlet's soliloquies seemed to have been a firm favourite) or reading a copy of that day's newspaper. Truth was, the telephone was then conceived as a means of conveying news, music or propaganda to the far reaches of the land. In days before broadcasting, it was believed that people beyond the limits of newspaper distribution (a more acute problem in the US than the UK) would huddle round their telephone and hear the newspaper read to them, presumably including the ads.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the instrument had started to be embraced by the business community in the US. In truth the similarities between the evolution of the fixed phone and that of the mobile, which would occur almost 100 years later, are startling. The early fantasies of concerts, newspaper and broadcasts had now given way to a usage that we could relate to, but only in a limited sense. The massive growth of the telephone in America had coincided with a similar expansion of the economy in the last quarter of the century. Goods and services were flowing all across the nation on the railroad and trade from the mid west to the east was creating a huge boom. The telephone was a heaven-sent solution to the problems of supplying information and goods around a vast nation. So conversations were during business hours, about business matters and on a business tariff. Just as with mobile, business usage drove early adoption, and consumer take-up was limited. In another eerie precedent, in an effort to break out of the business cycle and make the telephone a true consumer product, the phone companies introduced a pre-pay variant. They were called pay phones and soon there were hundreds of thousands of them throughout the US.

Even in those early days there were two tariffs; \$40 a year for the rental of a business line and \$20 for personal use. Students of the mobile phone industry will see that while the early pioneers of the telephone may have got the patterns of usage quite wrong, they were uncannily accurate in predicting the best way to take money from their customers.

Just how you charge for something that has pretty much no operating costs, above and beyond the sunk cost of operators and miles of copper wire is something that telephone companies have argued and debated for years. In the very early days when the first wires were slung from New York to Boston, the cost of a call between those cities was calculated by recourse to the cost of a train ticket between the two. One return journey was judged to be the equivalent of eight calls, so as a return ticket cost \$4.50, the price of a call was set at 80 cents.

The mobile phone arrives

Mobile phones were only ever supposed to be a short-term stopgap until the caller and called reached a proper phone with wires. The pricing models were certainly eye-wateringly expensive, encouraging the briefest of conversation. In 1994 one of the pioneering mobile operators in the UK ran a campaign with the tag line “Be in when you are out” featuring a very upper class lady out on her horse. The message was clear: mobile phones were always going to be an expensive interregnum until you got back to the security of the wired phone.

This mindset was captured in one of the most notorious business quotes of recent times. Speaking in 1992, the President of AT&T declared “There will never be more than 100,000 cellular phone users in the USA.” Whilst it’s easy to mock now, his comments reveal a certain logic. If a mobile phone was only ever to be a

surrogate for a fixed phone, and you were never more than two minutes away from a fixed phone in the US, why would people ever bother going mobile? Pay phones and pagers was the US telecoms industry's response to the growth of the mobile, and it was a dogmatic position that they have not yet fully recovered from to this day.

Meanwhile in the rest of the world, the mobile phone was busy laying waste to the fixed. As Orange put it in 1994, "In the future, people will call people, not places." They along with Nokia share the honours for taking a technology and making it mass in Western Europe. Quite apart from any number of technical benefits, Nokia phones had phone menus that people could use straight out of the box, without recourse to ten thousand words of badly translated instructions and some complex technical drawings. The fact that if, for example, you wanted to call Adam, you searched under Adam, rather than remembered which "speed dial" contained his number seems very elementary today, but before Nokia this was the norm. Perhaps not surprisingly, all but a few of those pre-Nokia handset manufactures have disappeared for good.

So a new industry was born and the marketing men and women soon got to work across the developed world to convince us that mobile was cool.

Short Message Service

So far so expected. Then something happened that no one, least of all the sages at the agencies or operators, had ever predicted. People started using an obscure radio channel that was built into the networks as a "secret" channel for the engineers to send messages back to base. It laboured under the decidedly unglamorous moniker of Short Message Service, was constrained to only 160 characters and required a laborious process of entering letters through the numeric keypad. But once

discovered, this strange overlooked technological equivalent of the appendix transformed the image of the mobile phone, and has fundamentally altered how people live their lives.

SMS is at the heart of the radical edge of mobile. The process of change is a very simple one. People start using SMS, hesitantly at first, and then in increasing numbers. They recruit other people, who in turn recruit other people, and soon the ripple becomes a tidal wave. In May 2007 for example, 4.5 billion SMS were sent by the 80% of people who send text messages in the UK.

Behind these figures and at the heart of this craze is a hard core of Super Users, people who live their lives connected to their friends and families in a welter of text messages. For him or her, SMS becomes an addiction, and for every one occasional texter there are ten who send 400 a month. The frequency and nature of text messaging has modified the attitude and behaviour of these Super Users, and in turn these changes have rubbed off on the society in which they live. First let's look at how Super Users differ from their Luddite counterparts.

First SMS creates Super Users...

People like to be in groups. For the most part we cluster into tribes, families, cities, towns and villages. People who live on their own and eschew contact with other people are labelled recluse or loner. Wanting to be in touch with other people is a perfectly normal human trait. Perhaps that's why, when given the opportunity to be with people the whole time, even when in different physical spaces, Super Users jump at the chance. Just because they can be in constant contact, Super Users are in constant contact. But the flip side of always having an open channel of communication connecting you to all your friends is that you are never isolated. Let me give you an example of what constant contact is like.

Just before one of my research groups of 16-year-old Super Users began, three of the girls got the same message more or less at the same time. It was from a mutual friend who was telling them all she couldn't text, because her brother had broken his hand and she was going into hospital with him. I assumed that she had miss-hit a key and actually it was her hand that was broken, with perhaps weeks of no or slow texting ensuing. I was quickly corrected. She was going to be out of coverage for a while (a couple of hours) and had sent a message out to tell the circle that she was off-air. So for a Super User, a two-hour interregnum was an absence worth advertising.

These people may look the same on the outside as everyone else, but inside their brains are teeming with a constant and unfulfilled yearning for steady and constant contact with their circle of peers, friends and family.

Super Users live in a world where they know what their friends are doing on a day-by-day, often hour-by-hour, basis. Their planning is informal and ad hoc; once upon a time people used to arrange to meet under the station clock at Waterloo. A spoilt rendezvous courtesy of a late train or broken down car resulted in a frenzy of telephone calls to a commonly known fixed phone and a series of back-up meeting plans, more akin to the secret service than a quick beer after work. Super Users take this a step further; they will get to the vicinity of where they are meeting, and then decide by text when they are close.

This flexibility betrays a mindset that is revealing, and is one of the central contentions of this work. That for a certain type of person, this ability to be in constant touch draws like-minded people together. Put another way, Super Users tend to be friends with Super Users. They feel comfortable with the social norms that they each share, and generally have a similar outlook to the world around. It's not that SMS has necessarily changed their

point of view, it's just that the ability to be in constant contact is something that unites them, and brings out the best or worst in them, depending on your point of view.

All this has very real implications on how they live their lives. Back in 2003, in the dark days before Super Users made it to the US, I interviewed a group of 16 year olds in a small town in Connecticut. It happened just after I'd met their equivalent peer group in the UK. The Brit teenagers told tales of how they organised their Saturday nights in a rural northern town with a welter of text messages as they converged on an interesting place and the evening begun. The point about being a teenager is that there is always somewhere cooler to hang out, and the trick is to find the magic spot and be there first. If you are first there, then you are the coolest.

With SMS this is pretty straightforward. Back in 2003 the group in Connecticut were without mobile phones, let alone SMS. They told me that their way of determining what was 'cool' was to drive around town until they recognised a car they knew. Then both drivers would pull over, compare notes and move off to pick up the next person. Thus the social caravan grew until it converged on the cool spot. In 2007 when I went back to the same small town to do research for this project. I recounted this tale to the new breed of Super Users that now live there. They hooted with laughter. "How stupid is that" was the general consensus. They now organise themselves in exactly the same way as the UK counterparts, and thoughts of driving round town trying to spot someone they knew seems as old fashioned and antiquated as my English accent did to them. If in four years SMS can change the pattern of behaviour on teenagers in one small town, how great must that change be across the whole country? And why is no-one writing about it?

In summary then, Super Users are always connected, and never isolated. They are less planned, and live their lives in a more spontaneous way. They are better informed, and up to date with the world around them. Furthermore, because they are better at multi-tasking, they live very much in real-time. Finally they are less aware of distance, and are regularly in touch with more friends than most.

...then Super Users create Super Societies

So for Super users, SMS changes things dramatically by the frequency of their contact. That in itself would start a process of continual engagement that would reverberate around society, but those changes would be reasonably slow to eke out of the Super user environs. It means that being in constant contact becomes the norm, at least within the Super User universe, and it will affect how they live their lives.

The challenge to the broader society comes not from the frequency of contact, but the nature of the contact itself. The limitations of 160 characters, as well as the direct and unfettered access any mobile user has to any other mobile user, means that this new type of thinking and attitude seems out from their world to the world outside. The moment you send someone a text you are engaging with them in the rules of the SMS medium, not the broader rules of society. All the traditions and hierarchies are swept asunder in the need to get your message across in those 160 characters.

First an example in business. Consider the following scenario. You exchanged texts with your boss. In the informality of 160 characters, your relationship is never going to be the same again. The things that traditionally shaped that relationship are gone; the lift ride to the management floor, the glaring watch-tapping gatekeeper outside the office, an office five times the size of yours, the signed pictures of him with past Presidents and Prime

Ministers, the classical music wafting gently against the background noise of people working away for him, the cup of coffee brought to you by the snooty but attractive EA, him settling into his chair and benefiting you with a little witty anecdote or insight to put you at your ease, before leaning forward in his chair to address the issue at hand and soliciting your opinion. All that has gone, BANG, and is replaced by the levelling of his 160 characters meets your 160 characters. No colours, no pictures, no sounds, no emotions. Straight to the point.

Super Users are more informal (you can't be too polite when you are dealing in 160 characters) they are more open to new ideas (because if you are sending and receiving 500 messages a month, you are "open" rather than closed), they are inherently viral which in turn means they lean towards a more horizontal society, rather than a vertical one. Think back to a minute to the deferential Britain of the 1950's and 60's. The protocols that one had to go through just to make a simple telephone call, the gatekeepers (parental or secretarial) who ultimately granted access or not, the two or three minutes of polite small talk to prove your worth...they are gone in a flash with your first text message.

SMS also breaks down taboos. In Japan, inventor of the Super User, SMS Books are a multi-million dollar business. Proper Japanese ladies don't read racy publications on public transport; it's not the done thing. SMS provides an instant delivery mechanism for any content you like in a private and discrete manner that no one around you can possibly be aware of. Just as The Pill liberated a generation of women, so too can SMS provide women (or men) a small square a privacy, a window on the world that only they can look through, not just in Japan, but anywhere. The implications are profound, but largely undocumented.

This levelling is contagious. If you are a serial user of SMS you look down on someone who won't return your call or message, because it is such an un-democratic, vertical outdated way of behaving. That attitude has implications enough for "flat" societies in Europe (and is throwing up challenges in the erstwhile Iron Bloc) but in vertically stacked societies or organisations the strains are enormous.

In summary, societies awash with Super Users are less formal and more direct. They are less tolerant of hierarchies and used to unfettered, uncensored communications. They are open to new ideas, and express those ideas with a new degree of intimacy conceived out of the most immediate and personal medium known to man.

If the picture you are getting is that Super Users are in the vanguard of new ideas, trends, and fashions with a healthy disregard for authority, un-necessary protocol and old-fashioned ways of doing things, then you're beginning to get inside the heads of Super Users. If this is something that sounds vaguely contemporary, appealing and even exciting, then it may be that you are one yourself.

The Establishment will never use SMS

All this radical spreading of ideas, news and opinions from the pockets of one person to the next has had pretty significant effects on The Establishment. The Philippines is usually cited as being the best example of the social power of SMS. It was instrumental in the overthrow of President Joseph Estrada in January 2001; within an hour of the first text message volleys being sent out, tens of thousands of Filipinos converged on the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, known as EDSA to demonstrate against their president. Over a four-day period, four million of his

citizens showed up (dressed in black) in response to the simple stark text message that was sent out

Go 2EDSA, Wear blk

Having done for him once, SMS got Estrada a second time. Later that year senators loyal to their former boss halted his trial for Bribery, Corruption and Breach of the Public Trust. This time it took only seventy-five minutes for twenty thousand people to converge on Edsa to demand that justice was done. Ramon Isberto, an official at one of the country's mobile networks put it this way:

“That sparked it. I mean, people saw it on television, and a lot of people were revolted, they started text messaging each other...and that thing created a combustion.”

Today, any half-decent totalitarian junta knows that rather than fortifying the radio station in the event of a coup, they are far better off heading for the mobile phone exchange. Disturbing pictures and videos of the recent unrest in Burma was spread to the world by SMS until the government disabled the mobile networks, but by then the world was aware. It begs a sad and poignant question; if Darfour was served by robust mobile phone coverage and its people equipped with camera phones, would so many thousands have died over so many years while the international community has stood idly by?

But the might of SMS isn't something preserved for totalitarian regimes in far-flung parts of the world. The two most far-reaching acts of civil protest in modern Britain took place in 1984 and 2000. The first involved 90,000 well-financed and organised coal miners in a nationwide strike that became an all-out battle to bring down a government; it failed.

The second involved a few thousand people, with no central command structure, just a common grievance about the price of fuel, and a web of SMS and mobile calls. The UK was almost brought to a complete halt by an ad hoc alliance of farmers, lorry drivers and disgruntled motorists, protesting over duty increases in fuel. In his book 'Servants of the People' Andrew Rawnsley puts the number as no more than 2500 nationwide, and quotes one minister at the centre of the crisis as saying that if the strike had continued any longer "there would be no food. The health service was going to collapse. We were twenty four hours away from meltdown, at best forty-eight hours away."

These 2500 people achieved what the 90,000 miners never did; staring into the abyss of a breakdown of public law and order, the government capitulated and reversed the rise in fuel duty. The protesters at the centre of the dispute were able to choreograph their actions with the seamlessness and fluidity of the mobile generation. There were no mobile phones in 1984 and certainly no SMS. Had there been, the miners may well have won, bringing down the Thatcher government along the way.

SMS can also put a strain on the great institutions of state. The Health Service in the UK, traditionally a hotbed of radical conservatism where patients are told what is best for them, and at the height of your professional career surgeons delight in referring to themselves as Mr again rather than Dr (and it is MR, rather than Mrs for the most part, in case you were wondering.) This environment is almost entirely free of mobile phones, free too of the glaring efficiencies of cost and money that every other business benefits from. There are reports about mobiles interfering with machines, but the truth is that every healthcare professional (and they are almost without exception incredibly professional) you meet will tell you that they use their mobiles indiscriminately throughout the day just as everyone else does. One is left with the feeling that an aversion to having their

patients calling them after hours and at weekends with minute-by-minute symptoms or diagnostic updates, has led the senior doctors to decree that mobile shall not be permitted in their hospitals. (need to introduce super users to this)

A second example of the democratising power of mobile running up against a firmly vertical entity can be seen when troops of any nation go into battle. They say that truth is the first casualty of war, but that's no longer true. Overseas roaming revenue is the real casualty; British and American troops entering Afghanistan and Iraq are stripped of their phones when they get off the plane. The power of the camera in capturing over-zealous defensive measures when dealing with civilians or prisoners proved too much for the generals.

What happens if I am not a Super User?

If this all seems like a bit of a drag, and that quite frankly the whole text message thing seems rather over-done, then you're probably a User. The signs are pretty clear. If you prefer to call and speak someone rather than send a text message, you're a User. If your phone goes off in a restaurant, theatre or meeting with a deafening shrill, the implication would be that you haven't mastered the technology, and you're a User. If your phone is always off, unless you wish to make a call, then you're a User. Perhaps the acid test, and the one that work best in research groups is to ask to borrow people's phone for an hour or two as "I'm expecting a call and I left my phone at home." A User would say yes. A Super User would prefer you took a kidney instead, because at least they'll have a spare.

The research that supports the Super User theory is compelling. Take a group of people or any given age, and ask them a simple control question to establish the level of dependency they have for their mobile; the "can I borrow your phone" questions works well, as does asking them if they would return home from school

or work if they forgot their mobile. You will then end up with two distinct groups. On the one hand, the phone-lenders and the “no I would never dream of going back for my phone” brigade are Users. The others are Super Users.

What’s fascinating about this is that without meaning to, you create two largely homogenous groups. If you are a Super User, living your life via text, the chances are so too are all your friends. Think about it in your own life for a moment. As we get older and busier, the people you keep in touch with are the people who share the same communication methods that we do. If you are a big user of SMS, it’s a struggle to keep up with someone whose idea of interaction is a postcard.

So our two groups tend to be discrete from one another. The Super Users are more extrovert, more fashionable, more chatty and far more in touch with the world around. In student circles they know where to go, what’s happening on campus and in school, and are generally seen as the people to know. Amongst workers, the same sociability is easy to spot. They are, in conventional marketing speak, the Influencers, that most valuable of consumer groups, pursued at every turn by ingratiating brands.

And the distinction continues as you go up the age scale. Super Users are decidedly not a youth phenomenon, and whilst the numbers do diminish you can find obsessive senders of SMS well into their 70s and 80s. All of which leads you to a fantastic question: do Super Users live longer. The rationale here is that being more engaged with the outside world is a proven way of keeping the old, young. If one can prove that Super Users are more connected to the outside world, then can someone prove that Super users live longer now, and will continue to do so in the future? That would be a first. Mobile phones make you live longer...

Any self-respecting segmentation worth its salt should be able to offer up a string of real people as evidence of its relevance and representation. So too with Super Users. They are everywhere, and the truth is you probably know several yourself. Who knows, you may even be one.

Super Users on mobile

Let's look first at their live on mobile. In the first place, they are in control of their devices. If you are using your phone for more than talking, and you don't think that your phone has to be off to be quiet, then you are a Super User. Many Super Users will never turn their phones off; one I met recently couldn't remember the last time he had turned his phone off. Another distinctly remembered it as being 3 months ago, because he had run out of battery and his world went into meltdown until he could borrow a charger.

So always on, but not always noisy. The silent function is the most common resting state for this group; if your predominant channel is text, then why bother with noisy jarring ring tones that draw needless attention to you. Besides, the phone is most likely to be in your hand, on the table in front of everyone or as a last resort in your pocket or bag. If the former, then it will be proudly laid out in the way that people used to display their brand of cigarettes, as if to say "look at me. I use a Nokia, and I'm comfortable with that." If the latter, then a Super User will have the phone locked to prevent those embarrassing 'rummage calls' when you are treated to four minutes of answer phone message revealing either deep dark secrets from intimate conversations, or the rhythmic rustling of someone walking to work.

The choice of handset is interesting too. Contrary to what you might think, Super Users won't always go for the shiniest newest model. Once you get used to a type of phone, and can find your way round the menu without looking, giving that up is something

that you only do when something significantly better comes along. This group tend to be very brand loyal, and stick to their trusted 'user interface'. The process of re-learning your way round a new mobile phone is something that can seriously disrupt your phone usage, and play havoc with your life. Super Users switch phones with care.

Super Users off mobile

So always on, rarely out of sight, unlikely to be intrusive. Three characteristics of mobile usage. As far as a life off mobile is concerned, Super Users tend to be big users of IM and social networking. In a way these three go hand in hand; you would expect communication junkies not to pass up any opportunity to broadcast to a wider audience, but it's worth spending a moment considering the important differences between text on the one hand and PC based communication on the other.

If you force Super Users to create a communications hierarchy (as I have done many times in research groups) where they rank fixed calls, mobile calls, text messages, e-mail, instant messaging and social networking (which increasingly means Facebook) there is a remarkable consistency of response.

The first thing you notice is that e-mail is a business-centric tool for people over the age of 25. It simply does not exist for people under that age, apart from a necessary evil in the form of submitting papers to school or college. Hearing 16-year-old Super Users sitting discussing how absurd and unnecessary email is, it's very easy to see the world from their point of view. If you can send messages and documents by IM why would you mail them? It will be interesting to see how the rigours of business influences their views, but one suspects that the Blackberry variant will win over; a sort of email-light which is rarely dealt with over a PC, and lives only as a bastard-son of text messaging.

The next casualties are fixed and mobile calling, the first a casualty of the mobile society and perhaps the biggest departure from the preceding generation of phone-hoggers; the latter simply a function of the perceived cost of talking on the move. It's not that Super Users don't like to chat from their mobile, it's just that it's expensive and needless when you can talk over the IM clients or better still IM with five or six people at once.

For Super Users, the top three are consistently IM, Facebook and SMS. The first two are free, limitless but strictly by appointment only. Depending on your daily schedule, you are unlikely to be able to reach all the people you need to reach by these two channels alone. Super Users accept that. When you ask them to pick one channel that they rely on to send their most time-sensitive and important information over, they all pick SMS.

PART 2: MOBILE INTERNET OR INTERNET MOBILE?

More convergence, anyone?

Convergence is all around us. It's in the newspapers, on the Internet and in every analyst report doing the rounds. Business correspondents file stories on the implications, companies make it the centre of their marketing and advertising stories. It's everywhere, except in the real world, the world that really matters. Mobile and Internet, the two over-mighty forces that shape our waking lives, are still operating as two independent ecosystems, bouncing off one another from time to time, but broadly autonomous and independent. Any other convergence chatter you may hear is nothing compared to the gigantic thud that's going to greet the coming together of Internet and mobile in the next three years.

Most of us can remember life before the Internet. The days of encyclopaedias, record shops and correction fluid. We can also remember a time before mobile, where life was slower, and we were required to do fewer things at the same time; when being out of contact described probably 30-40% of the working day. Looking back now on both pre-internet and pre-mobile days, it's infuriating that no one seemed to predict with any certainty the speed and significance of their rise. One minute no one had computers and only a few rich people had mobiles; the next they were everywhere. If only we could have seen they were coming, we could have been better prepared.

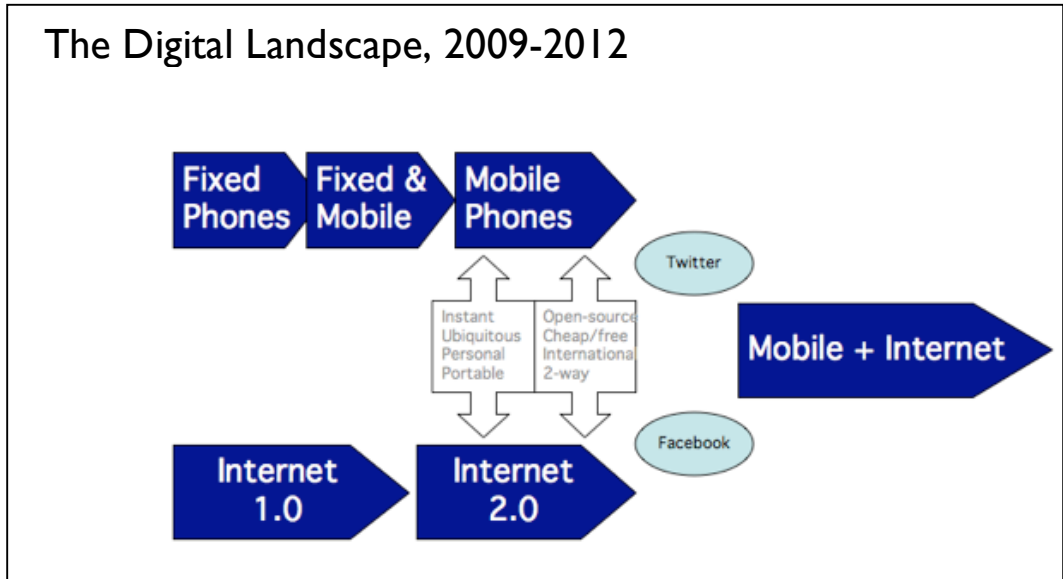
The same can't be said of the fusion of Internet and mobile. Barely a day goes by without someone in the mobile world announcing that the Internet is now entirely at your disposal with their network, service or device. The big beasts of the Internet are

likewise banging the mobile drum. In the race to take the Internet and make it mobile, there is a compelling logic that says, “because I dominate the internet space, wherever you consume the internet, I’ll be on top.”

The phoney war is almost over

What makes the skirmishing so fascinating is that this is a phoney war. Mobile internet, or internet on mobile has been around in some form since the ill-fated WAP experiments of the 1990’s, but the evolution has been creeping and slow. In Darwinian terms, the mobile internet is barely out of the water and not yet into the trees. The ramifications, as with all new technologies, are overstated in the short term, and understated in the long term.

The long term is almost upon us. If for a moment you doubt the implications of this convergence, consider for a moment the differences between them.



The mobile ecosystem...

About the only thing that the internet world, and the mobile world share is a love of IP. The only trouble is that IP for the

mobile world stands for Intellectual Property, and represents the proprietary nature of the cellular world. The towers masts and backbone have all been funded, built and maintained by the operators; vast eye-watering amounts of capital expenditure that have been deployed within the warm comforting embrace of a regulated environment. Governments licence spectrum to mobile operators (often at considerable cost) and it's that regulated environment that reassures investors that their capital deployments are safe.

From this economic starting point, the destiny of mobile was set: it is the very the purpose of the operators to secure a long term return on that investment, which means we as mobile phone users will never get something for nothing, unless it's a short-term sweetener to lure us into long-term bondage. Mobile handsets are often locked to a particular network; if not, then the SIM cards that provide their intelligence certainly are. We contract exclusively to one provider for a set duration, or in the case of pre-pay, until the money that we shovel into our account runs out.

To complete the picture, and layer on the irony, mobile is in fact only mobile to a degree. That degree is the limitations of a network operator, which usually means the national boundary or frontier. Once you step foot beyond the country where you sign-up, punitive charges are levied that have no basis in economics. In the US that locale is often smaller than the national frontier, as historically the regulatory system encouraged hundreds of local cellular start-ups to emerge, each bearing their own rates and technologies. Not all those companies have interoperability agreements in place for things like SMS or picture messaging, and whilst in the rest of the world they have sorted out the technology, there is almost always a price premium for talking, texting or sending pictures from one national network to another.

Finally, this mobile ecosystem in which 2 billion people live their lives is remarkable because at any one time mobile phone users only every have a relationship with two brands. Brand one: your handset manufacturer. Brand two: your network operator. And that's it. Until recently all other brands have been excluded from the mobile experience, and whilst a few have begun to muscle their way in (Google being an obvious example) their involvement is peripheral at present.

...is totally different to the internet ecosystem

From a business point of view, pretty much everything that can be said of mobile can't be said of the internet. IP stands for internet protocol. For freedom, and open source. The internet itself is one gigantic railway track, open to all and free for whatever purpose users and companies want to make of it. The only regulation is the self-regulation of getting your investment back, and unless that involves the sticky-fingered venture capitalists, internet companies are free to create whatever services their hearts desire. Today for example (17/9/07) I read that over the last year 1.5 million people have logged on to www.cheddarvision.tv to follow the fate of a maturing Cheddar Cheese from Shepton Mallet. This is just one of a multitude of similarly pointless web ventures which would all be commercially impossible in the closed world of mobile. It's one thing to find your way to a slowly rotting block of whey solids for free, but quite something else to pay for the privilege of seeing it.

So if the internet is open to all, it's also open-source, with a common language and technical requirements. As a result, people's repertoire of brands is wide and varied. In a majority of cases they will use different brands for their machine itself, operating system, ISP, any programmes they use, search, music, movies, pictures, news, IM, sports, e-tailing and browsers. Whilst today that sounds pretty obvious there was a time not long ago when the industry was dominated by one of two big brands, who yearned to own the relationship from start to finish: Internet

Service Providers, the PC manufacturers and Microsoft. Who can forget the struggles of the late 1990's when getting your computer out of the box at home was a constant battle for dominance between those three protagonists: "Click OK to make x your default e-mail program/browser/home page" closely followed minutes later by "Click y to make your default...."

All of this is a long way from the mobile environment and its two-branded hand. It is also, for the most part, free. Once you have paid to access the super highway, then you are free to come and go as you wish. Only if you chose to buy something online will you pay anything.

Now think back to our mobile rules of business. How successful would IM be if there was a charge per message like SMS? Who can conceive of MSN email either not working with Apple users, or worse still, people being charged more for messages that cross borders, Yet that is precisely how the mobile industry works. At the moment.

It's not convergence, it's collision

Perhaps now the full implications of the internet and mobile colliding are becoming more apparent. This also goes a long way to explain why the big beasts of the internet have not always made the leap to mobile, and the mobile brands have stuttered in the internet world. Today's mobile internet is a very diluted form; when people talk about mobile internet they are referring to the look-up-and-learn part of the internet for the most part, rather than the ability to push speech, text and images around the world for free. Wi-Fi, and its bigger uglier brother Wi-Max is an open source network that an increasing number of mobile phones are able to access. At the moment, Wi-Fi phones have shorter battery lives and are still only prevalent amongst the early adopter (Super User) community, but Apple chose not to build the iPhone with 3G capabilities, but instead to rely on Wi-Fi. This is a clear

statement of how critical they see the mobile operators in the value chain.

The Sony Play Station Portable (PSP) is an interesting example of hardware waiting for the software to catch up; the many million PSPs in the world will one day be upgraded with new software that provides VOIP and browser capabilities to their hordes of users. Sony Ericsson are presently musing on the idea. As the number of Wi-Fi open access hotspots continues to increase, so does the chances of a day when people will spend much of their time in Wi-Fi coverage zones, making free calls and sending limitless strings of free IM (rather than paid-for SMS) 'roaming' onto the networks only when they are between hotspots. According to Nokia, 80% of our day will be spent in Wi-Fi coverage (homes, offices, shops, restaurants, bars) and in only 20% of occasions will we need true mobility (cars, trains, busses).

But if this sounds disruptive, once we make the leap from mobile to mobility, then things really get interesting. Having one device that is a panacea for all our needs makes little long-term sense. The mobility you need when you go out for dinner is very different to that of an intensive working day. Devices will become very much smaller (wristwatch sized) or bigger, depending on the requirements. If I sit in my home or office taking advantage of free and unrestricted Wi-Fi coverage on my Nokia N95 and my Mac, which of those experiences is mobile and which is internet? The only real distinction between the two is down to device, and if that distinction is going to disappear, how will we be able to say what's mobile and what's internet?

Super Users hold the key here. Brands will come and go in the next three years, businesses will be turned on their head and fortunes will be made and lost trying to enrol or retain customers who are otherwise inclined, and haven't read the rule book. Super Users have a very simple codified set of needs in this new

converged digital age, and they are the heads to watch as the twin rivers of internet and mobile converge in a mass of white water and froth.

The final section of this pamphlet predicts how Super Users will fare in this new digital age, and tries to give some more practical instruction on the do's and don't for brands and businesses. Before that we look a bit more at the development and evolution of the Super User in the United States and in Europe.

PART 3: SUPER USERS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Super Users in the USA; a rare breed but growing fast

Just about the only upside to being a chronicler of Supers User is that you get to revisit places time and time again, and keep track of the progress a nation makes towards full mobile maturity. I am a life-long fan of the United States of America and its people. I find the energy and scale of the place inspirational, and whilst it has its faults, which country doesn't.

It's instructive to reproduce my notes from when I last travelled to the US on a avowedly mobile mission. It's a helpful benchmark in the Super User progression.

In June 2003 I flew to New York. It was my first breakout from work, into the hazy world of research. I had bought myself a return ticket for ten days or so, and made some vague plans to see some people I knew north and south of Manhattan. Despite the floating itinerary, for me there was a clear purpose to the trip; go and watch the east coast of America on their mobile phones.

When the towering customs man asked me if I had anything to declare, I lied. I didn't tell him that I was travelling in the belief that his nation was composed of people who didn't spend any time on their mobile phones. I had my prejudices, most notably that the mobile phone hadn't yet landed in the US. I also thought that I was heading for a nation of Users, with nary a text to their name. Two weeks later I came away realising that I had been half right and half wrong. I can report that the US is bursting with mobiles, despite some urban myths that you may hear to the contrary. But, that said, I can also report that if you are looking

for Super Users, then look elsewhere, because I couldn't find one, let alone a handful.

That was 2003, and the score emphatically Mobile Phone Users One, Super Users Nil. Again, in the spirit of before and after, I reproduce here a section about the charming Bryant Park in Manhattan from 2003, and then follow it with notes from a visit in August 2007, a full four years later. The differences are instructive.

Bryant Park: June 2003

As I mentioned above, in the true interests of robust research, I needed more research. I took myself to Bryant park, on the corner of 40th street and 6th avenue. It's a park occupying an area about the size of a city block, with a big open-sided concert hall at one end, a stretch of grass and a fountain at the side nearest the road. Being a sunny day, and around lunchtime, it was thronged with people, sitting on the little green metal chairs around the little green metal tables that were scattered around the fountain.

I walked through the crowd, trying to blend in and look like I was trying to spot a friend waiting for me. There were people of all ages and, this being America, all sizes, engaged in any manner of tasks. There were people eating their lunch, people chatting to one another, people reading books newspaper and magazines, and some people doing all three. One man lounged against the fountain, and stared into the middle distance just relaxing before he had to go back to work. A policeman strolled amiably amongst them, chatting to the crowd who engaged him with a friendly banter that said more about community relations than crime control. It was the archetypal lunchtime setting, replicated in cities all over the world apart from one startling omission. There were

probably five hundred people in the park, and I counted five people on the phone. Five.

Having failed to spot my non-existent friend, I retreated to the edge of the square and in a studied display of nonchalance, started taking pictures of the whole scene. I have them here in front of me, fourteen images showing just what I have described, and not a phone in sight. The fifteenth is the exception; a full-length picture of a man walking through the square on the phone. I remember wondering at the time whether he could be the brother of the one woman I saw on the phone that morning when sitting looking out of the window of a diner. If not, they should meet. Perhaps they already had and were talking to one another.

Four years later, and mobiles are everywhere, proudly on display all around the park like the social status symbols that they are. The same setting, the same sunshine, but a host of people talking away in public, and even a very few texting. On one of my “here to meet an imaginary friend” sweeps of a packed square I counted four people sending texts, out of probably a thousand. As I said, it’s a start, but somewhere out in the US there are millions of Super Users sending about 25 billion SMS a month.

Brant Park: 6 September 2007

Bryant Park is an important place. Not only is it the mustering point for the New York Marathon (I think), not only is a lovely shaded square, a haven from the hustle and bustle of a motorised New York, but it’s covered with a blanket of free unrestricted Wi-Fi.

The implications are profound on a micro and a macro scale.

Take my present experience. Having paid the voluntary price of admission (a Grandee Caramel Macchiato: Starbucks, \$4.55) here I sit on the pretty park tables and chairs with listening to the songs of a guy called Alex who has kindly allowed me (and anyone else in the square) to listen to his music for free. After that I think I'll download the first Ricky Gervais podcast from Guardian Unlimited, as I never got round to listening to it. The other seven were great value for money, especially as they were free. I'll probably conclude my hour or so here by calling my wife who is in Italy with our sons. I'll use Skype², so neither of us will pay anything for the privilege. I could go on.

So where's the price of this free lunch then? What's the implications of giving away something that Starbucks, for instance, sell for \$6 an hour? Surely they are miffed, to say the least.

Apparently not. There's a Starbucks on the corner that is so rammed, I had to queue both to order and then receive the "beverage of my choice." Not being ones to miss a trick, they have taken space in a shop that is little bigger than a disabled washroom, and are selling exclusively take-out drinks. You can almost see the margin in a ticker running across the till. 300%? 500%?? Everyone buys their drinks and then walks across the road and sits in the square, enjoying the public space.

I suspect that some of that margin goes to fund the army of flatfoots that patrol the square. Another flavour of the vast army of privately branded quasi-police officers that this city has to offer. Somehow the "special constables" at home always seem to be short and flat-footed, their rather large hips accentuated by utility belts that they strap on containing the tools of their trade (which are what exactly?). These guys are cut from a different cloth and look like cops, apart from the absence of guns.

² Now available and working on my N95 (10/10/07)

If I'm painting a rosy picture of this place, the centrepiece of the square also helps it. For this week only, and surely timed to coincide with my visit, New York Fashion Week has a large tented auditorium in the middle of the square. That makes Bryant Park jammed full of beautiful models, or other miscellaneous hangers-on from the fashion industry. Take my word for it. it's pretty glamorous.

Where does that leave mobile, the reason I'm here? The link here is that Bryant Park is the future, and it's a future that the mobile operators should wake up screaming about in the middle of the night. Imagine that the cost of covering this place with wi-fi and employing our happy security guard is easily outweighed by the general "greater good" of the extra business for the adjacent businesses. Imagine that it will become commonplace for squares, plazas, shopping centres and even big stores to wi-fi themselves, and encourage people to come and spend time in their environs with no obligation.

Then imagine if you are sitting in this free wi-fi coverage, and you have a choice between making a call with your mobile operator (not free) or using Skype et al (free), between sending a text (not free) and sending a string of IM messages (free)? See where I'm going with this now? And now the FCC has opened the Wi-Max spectrum auctions to all-comers, not just mobile operators, there is a chance that the operator stranglehold may be broken sooner than most people thought..

As the mobile industry moves towards an internet business model there will be winners and losers. Consumers will be the winners; more choice, less cost and most capabilities can only be good. Exciting new entrants will threaten the traditional mobile device manufacturers. On the plus side they will probably sell more devices direct to users, but as our definition of mobile broadens to

incorporate games players, pda manufacturers, timepieces and just about every other piece of consumer electronics kit that could have voice built in, the status quo will be threatened. The mobile operators too, those vast behemoths, that all over the world have spent billions of dollars building-out and maintaining their own networks, will feel the pinch. Their margins will shrink, and they will have to think harder and harder how to get a return on their capital.

Maybe they should get into the coffee business. The margins are great over there. \$4.55 for a cup of coffee is a rip off.

So Bryant Park represents the future of the connected converged world. It didn't throw up hordes of Super Users, but then that's not the American way...yet. It's still early days for mobile in the US, relatively speaking. You can see this in so many ways; the Super Users are coming, but they are still small in number, but increasing exponentially.

Standing counting people coming out of the Subway on 47th and 50th street, by Rockefeller Centre Station between 0834 and 0840 the totals were as follows:

People on the phone or initiating a call:	3
People listening to iPods or similar	9
People sending or receiving text messages	0
People doing nothing of the sort	62

In an effort to see if there was a difference in Subway passengers to over-ground passengers I went to the towering cathedral of Union Station and counted people spewing across the concourse, in full mobile coverage. The ratios were broadly the same as those above, but I began to look at the texters themselves. Of the eight I picked out in the six minutes I stood there with my clipboard, seven were young women, and one was a young man.

(Five were Asian which made me wonder if there is a technology creep that comes in from friends and relatives in China and Japan.)

You can judge for yourself how that compares to wherever you are in the world, but it's fewer than in London and Paris. The point here is not just about volume, but value. The Super Users in the US are the classic influencer audience, at the very edge of the latest trends. They are literally worth their weight in gold to advertisers. Influence one Super User in the US and you convert dozens. Now is the time to strike and embrace the Super Users, while they make up the bulk of outbound texters.

The interviews I conducted with the Super Users I found in Bryant Park confirmed that this cultural phenomenon is on the march, and the implications are as sweeping in the US as anywhere else.

The first Super User I cornered was Kyle. He is 24, very good looking and has an effortless cool that most people can only dream of (the author included). I met him in the sunshine at Bryant Park, one of the thousand or so people enjoying the late summer sun. I spotted him as I was looking for somewhere to sit and take stock after a busy morning around the city. He was head down, fingers and thumbs a blur as he bashed out a message or messages on his Sidekick. For those of you who haven't come across the Sidekick, it's a device about the size of a pack of cards, with a screen about 26 cards thick. You slide it sideways, the spring takes over, and before you know it you have a decent sized QWERTY keyboard to tap away at, with a small colour screen at right angles. They are designed, and sold, to Text Message maniacs, with an unlimited data plan for \$20 a month. As many SMS as your fingers can supply for the price of 5 visits to Starbucks.

Kyle had been a text addict for a year he told me. Now it's the only way he communicates with people, or in his words "I never call, except to speak to my parents."

The three stages of SMS adoption

The only substantive difference between him and Jen, who I met next, was that her mother had learned to text because she knew Jen never answered her phone. This is the way that SMS skips generations and rushes through societies. It hits first with 16 year olds, kids with time on their hands and often still living with phones paid for by parents who are looking the other way. They (the children) have an instinctive curiosity with all things technical, and the readiness to explore every function and feature on their phones which only age can deplete.

In its early stages, the student population aren't huge texters; they seem to prefer their pleasures to be more carnal or baccaulaurean, but they are always on the hunt for free SMS sites or other workarounds. As the market evolves and the text bundles come down in price, the student market ignites in a fireball of text messaging. It is the perfect medium for such an insular gossipy community; cash is their only the constraint.

Once out of school or college and in full time work, text usage soars again. The freedom that a first pay check gives one, the blur of social opportunities and abundance of interesting novel ways to spend it is perfect hunting ground for texting. All the Super Users I met in Bryant Park in September 2007 were in this category; between 22 and 27 years of age, young curious and connected. They are in the Super User sweet spot, and powerful consumers and opinion leaders in their own right.

From here the trail splits. As with Jen, the leap to a parental generation using SMS comes from a weariness induced by dozens

of unreturned calls, and ignored answer phone messages. Just as computer usage made the leap into mass market when children tutored parents on the wonders of the internet, middle aged Super Users take their lead from their children, and a whole new breed of texters is spawned.

The other group that adopt the technology in this second stage is the middle managers; through with the exuberance of their first pay cheques, but not yet with teenage kids, they range in age between early thirties and late forties. Business seems to be an incubator for SMS adoption for this group. A desire to stand out from the crowd, and show your technology credentials is a good proxy for “getting on” in business, and whilst there are formidable productivity gains to be made by using SMS, in the early days it looks to be all about showing off.

The third stage spread of SMS is to the very old and very young. Unlike the other stages of growth this is more by design than by accident. Young children below the age of 16 are introduced to SMS by their older siblings, but only provided with the facilities to send and receive text messages by their parents. The same is true of the grandparent generation. Often they have been equipped with a mobile as a form of security blanket by anxious children; instruction on text messaging is something that naturally follows, often as a way of keeping in touch with their grandchildren. Here the manufacturers have let them down. Fingers that aren't quite as nimble as they once were and eyesight that is past its best make texting more difficult. Despite a few hugely patronising attempts to design phones for old people (just because they are old, why do people think they are stupid?) no one has really appreciated the scale of the opportunity here, or managed to make it happen.

So stage one, 16 – 18 year olds and young workers in their first jobs, cheeks aglow with newfound wealth, say 24 – 29. Stage two

is students, parents and middle managers (an unholy alliance if ever there was one). Stage three, younger children 9 – 15 and the elderly. And then eventually (and not always) the grey-haired self-proclaimed captains of industry finally get SMS and the insurgency of mobile. However well their gatekeepers operate, sooner or later someone will have the audacity to send them a text message directly, and there it is. They have been violated. Imagine!

Returning to the US then, both the qualitative and quantitative evidence indicates that we are firmly in stage one, 16 years old kids and young professionals. Jen (25) was sitting with her friends Sarah (27) and Lea (25) having lunch in the park. One of the most endearing features of stage one is that the taboos of mobile phone usage still exist. They all agreed that it would be the height of rudeness to be sending texts to other people, while they were with someone else; I had only spotted Jen in a loutish moment as she returned a message to her boyfriend.

My notes just about managed to keep up with them as they rattled off their views on texting to a complete stranger with the spontaneous choreography of three close friends, each finishing one another's sentences.

“I’d only text when I’m on my own...it would be rude to text with friends...so on the bus and the trains everyone texts...although you do it more in Europe don’t you...Lots of relationships started by text. If I met a guy in a bar, the first conversation afterwards is so awkward. It’s much better to text the next day...all my friends text...and my mum now texts me as she knows it’s the only way to get hold of me...”

Perhaps the saddest interview I conducted with a girl sitting on a bench sending a message. She was 29, and looked to be picking her way through the numbers on her keyboard with laborious care. We talked a bit about texting, but I could see her heart

wasn't really into it. She told me she sent about three messages a day. I asked her who she had been texting and she said she has just been sending a message to a girl she had met in the street last week. Perhaps that sounded odd to her, because she added, "I've only just moved here, and I don't know many people." Her voice trailed away. Lonely place, New York.

Super Users in Europe: here in force and here to stay

I'm not going to spend any time in this chapter proving that Europe is awash with Super Users. It's self-evident for anyone that lives, moves or visits here. People just text more in Europe, and for a variety of historical reasons they got a head-start over their US counterparts. Just as the US lags behind Europe, so Europe is behind Asia in the cult of the Super User.

Instead of chronicling the rise of European Super Users, it's better to give them a voice. They make up a sizeable proportion of the population, to a high water mark of about 60% as an estimate amongst the most susceptible audiences.

Seen through the eyes of a European Super User, the world is an invisible web of thoughts, comments questions and suggestions that float all around us. During the early days of the fixed phone, when technology was such that each call required its own wire, the skies above American towns and cities were black with rows and rows of cables in a way that would be completely unacceptable to us today. They ran across the roofs, often bringing down chimney pots in storms, across streets and over pavements. In the photographs of the cities at that time, the hard evidence of the growth of telephones were all around you and impossible to miss. Today's Super User feels the same sense of connectivity but it's invisible. From the moment they wake up they are connected with the rest of their world. Users have to

make an effort to be connected by logging on to the internet, waiting for the post to arrive or being in the same physical place as someone. Super Users don't.

The effects of this cannot be underestimated. Entire swathes of people in Europe never have a dull moment. Children travelling to school on the bus or train used to find other ways to entertain themselves; bullying the fat kid with glasses, writing on the windows with a big thick marker pens or the point of a compass, or even reading, or finishing their homework. Travel in the same carriage as a group of children on the way to school now and you'll hear the beep beep of messages being tapped out and the signal of incoming texts. You'll hear ring tones being demonstrated, games being played, messages being compared and in some cases one child programming another's phone to play a particular tune. Phones have also become portable and public sound systems, blaring out tinny rap anthems to anyone who will listen (and all those who won't). It's about identity and image, especially if the owner can text fluidly amidst the din.

The age-old complaint from the back of the car of "I'm bored" is not something that you need hear anymore. As long as your phone is working and in credit then there's always someone that will return your message. So why have a dull unconnected moment when you can have an interesting connected one? Why indeed.

From this sense of always being connected comes a complete absence of isolation. If you've got your world at your fingertips, when are you truly alone, totally isolated, with no one to turn to?

Ten years ago if you wanted to be alone in the UK you could catch a train up to Northumberland, put a tent on your back and disappear off into the Kielder Forest and lose yourself amongst the trees. The sense that there was probably no one for ten miles,

(and even if there was, the thick black curtain of pine trees lost them to you) was both exhilarating and sobering. Today if you've got your phone, you're never alone. Forget the vagaries of the UK rail network, go to an unfamiliar part of London on the bus with your phone still on the kitchen table back home and you get exactly the same feeling. Isolation, unfamiliarity, panic even. Isolation used to be a 300-mile train journey away. Now it's a Super User on the number 19 bus without their mobile.

But is loneliness necessarily all bad? There is an argument that says by confronting our fears and challenging the unfamiliar, we become more rounded human beings. At the extreme of this argument lies the cold baths and cross-country runs before dawn of the traditional English Public School. Put another way, Super Users who have grown up in the last 15 years in Europe have never been out of touch with people and have rarely had prolonged periods on their own.

Travelling used to be a rite of passage after school or university, something to endure and enjoy, before work started in earnest. It seems that travelling today falls into two camps; the world is either too dangerous or disease ridden to visit, or too easy and familiar. Where once there were travellers cheques, wedges of dollars handed over to local moneychangers and payphones in the street, now there are credit cards, cash machines and mobile phones.

These days making a call in Barking is no more complicated than making a call in Basra. Just put +44 at the front and off you go. Better still, text them and they will think that you at home watching the football. For all their obvious attributes, Super Users run the risk of becoming cosseted by the warm embrace of constant contact.

All of which leads to a further difference between Users and Super Users in Europe. Frances Cairncross's famous telecoms business book *The Death of Distance* was written for a different audience and for a slightly different purpose but the principle still holds true for Super Users. If your preferred method of keeping in touch is via text, what does it matter where that person is. If you have a girlfriend or boyfriend that you only see during at the weekend, what does it matter where they spend their week if each day is passed in a blitz of text messages. They can be anywhere in the GSM world.

Distance is a relative concept. In the nineteenth century the expansion of railway networks were described at the time as the "fading of time and place." In today's world where we have sight and sound at our fingertips, it's tempting to be dismissive and cast such a description as hyperbole. And yet such a description was undeniably true in its day. There are plenty of ways to empathise with those who saw the expansion of mass transit as revolutionary and threatening. Read *Cider With Rosie*, and marvel at the description of the remote hilly villages of life in 1917 Gloucester. (For those unfamiliar with its charms, Gloucester is on the way to absolutely nowhere. One either passes to the south of it towards West Country or north of it en route to Wales. It is a destination in its own right, and that coupled with the steep valley hills with settlements up high meant that once you were at the top of those hills, you'd do everything possible not to come down again. It is a beautiful landscape, best discovered by car.)

Lee describes the moment when the first bus comes through the village in which he lived and the effect it had. It also meant exploration to a new world for the villagers as on annual Church outings they travelled to the nearest town

“in our file of five charabancs, a charioted army, we swept down the thundering hills. At the speed and height of our vehicles the whole valley took on new dimensions: woods rushed beneath us, and the fields and flies were devoured in a gulp of air.”

There were obvious advantages to the spread of ideas, news and goods and services in a way that was not possible before, but with them also went much of the tradition and timelessness that can never be replaced. To the people in his village that was little short of a revolution in time and space.

Text messaging is carrying on in that radical tradition, and Super Users are leaving in their wake a slew of tradition. We are living through changes every bit as dramatic as those Lee described, and the time before mobile will, for our children, seem every bit as quaint and foreign as the early twentieth century now does to us.