

From <http://www.ronalfy.com>

Ronald J. Huereca

Humanities 432 / 9DDP

Research Paper

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2003

## **Social Issues of Cell phones**

### **Introduction:**

Throughout history, there have been many substantial advances in technology that have revolutionized the way a culture behaves. One of these technological advances is that of the telephone. The telephone made it possible for two people to communicate over long distances. Now imagine this telephone was portable and could move just about anywhere and still provide the link between two people. This portable telephone, currently called the cell phone, made communication possible virtually anywhere. Cell phone technology has brought humans closer than ever, but there are disadvantages. Throughout this paper, the technological and social impacts of cell phone technology on society will be discussed.

### **History:**

Essentially, the cell phone is just a portable telephone. According to Britannica Micropaedia, the earliest telephones were from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and consisted of two cups connected together with a string attached. The modern telephone, as we know it, was invented by Alexander Graham Bell. Bell received the patent for the telephone in March of 1876 for its ability to “transmit speech sounds over electric wires.”

From <http://www.ronalfy.com>

Early designs of the telephone were modified by Thomas Watson, Emil Berliner, Thomas Edison, and others. However, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the basic design of the telephone hasn't changed. The invention of the transistor in 1947 did allow telephone circuitry to shrink considerably. Eventually telephone designers added modern functions such as re-dial, call waiting, speed dial, and even caller I.D.

In the early eighties, the telephone took on a new twist and evolved into the cell phone. The cell phone is actually a "radio telephone." A cellular system splits a city into "cells", where cell phone towers cover a specific area of the city in order to provide continuous cell service. Each "cell" can cover about 10 square miles. All cell phone towers are interconnected by the public telephone network. When a cell phone user calls another cell phone user, the call typically goes from a cell tower to the public telephone network and back out through another cell tower (Brain and Tyson).

**Beneficial Social Impact:**

In the event of an emergency, cell phones have one obvious advantage. Users of a cell phone can report an emergency quicker than a person who uses a payphone. Cell phone users can provide instant, accurate information from the scene of an accident or crime, rather than having to wait until authorities arrive to evaluate a situation. Therefore, with the advent of the cell phone, information from law enforcement

and emergency personnel can be gathered much more quickly without tedious delays (Cerullo). With the efficiency of communication improved, law enforcement and emergency personnel could arrive at the scene faster and provide the necessary seconds to save someone's life. As a result, cell phones save more lives on the road than what would have occurred if cell phones had never existed. Of 150 million 911 calls in 2000, roughly 33 percent of those were made from a cell phone (Schwartz).

A second advantage of cell phones is added security and reliability. Users of cell phones feel more secure than people without cell phones (Cerullo). Users can call anywhere, as long as they are in range of a "cell" tower. In the event the user is stranded or is in need of some medical assistance, the user can call and have assistance in far shorter time. With GPS units now being installed in cell phones, authorities can now pinpoint a cell user's location within a few meters. In addition to security, consumers now appreciate better customer service through reliability. Before cell phones, truck drivers would have to reach their destination before being given new schedules or routes. Now truck drivers and other personnel can change their plans on a moment's notice through a cell phone (Cerullo). With added security and reliability, a consumer is getting better customer service than before the advent of the cell phone.

Thanks to cell phones, parents are now able to constantly monitor their kids. For instance, in Thailand, parents are glad to give their children cell phones at a young age (Chaisri). Having a kid have a cell phone increases their independence from their parents, but allows the parent to constantly be able to reach their kid in the event of an emergency. Even before September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, young adults accounted for 33% of the wireless market in the U.S. (Costello). Now young adults will have no excuses when it

comes to checking in with their parents. The advent of the cell phone where society is rush-rush can increase the communication between parent and child, and keep the child's mind off doing inappropriate behavior because their parent could be one call away (Chaisri).

Last but not least, cell phones have become status symbols. A user of a cell phone is more than happy to show his or her phone to a colleague in order to provide the "wow" effect. In addition, a study reports that males have the tendency to display their cell phones as status symbols to show their aggressiveness, possibly in response to a subconscious mating ritual for women (Plant). Because of cell phones achieving the level of status symbol, users of cell phones feel better satisfaction about displaying their cell phone and/or talking on the phone in public.

**Potentially Dangerous Social Impact:**

Until driving becomes completely automated, cell phones pose a dangerous road hazard. In societies where the automobile is the main form of transportation, the chance for an accident is quadrupled if the driver is talking on a cell phone (Bergman et al.). In the United States, 55% of drivers have cell phones, and of that, 73% use them frequently while driving (Nobel). As a result, many states are tossing around the idea of banning the use of cell phones while driving. In 2001, the state of New York started issuing fines for talking on a cell phone in a car (New York Times). Several states, most notably New Jersey, were next to follow with cell phone bans (New York Times). A recent study by Harvard University in 2002 linked cell phones to 2600 fatalities a year (Edmonds and Simitian). It is expected that more states will follow New York and New Jersey's lead in banning cell phone use in cars.

Cell phones users also have the tendency to be unaware of their surroundings and appear to have fewer manners than non-users. Cell phones are changing places that used to be quiet, such as movie theatres, libraries, and museums, into endless streams of conversation. Even nature walks are now full of hikers and adventurers blabbing away (Edmonds and Simitian). The subconscious goal of a cell phone is to feel un-lonely, but it does quite the opposite. A cell phone user is removed from his or her surroundings, making the person more isolated than ever. In addition, the public around them is hearing every word that the cell phone user says, making the once private world of a cell phone user public. As a result, private conversations are starting to become a thing of the past (Fleming). In an extreme example, the government no longer has to pry into people's lives to find out secrets; all they have to do is sit next to a cell phone user in a lounge and listen to him or her talking on the cell phone.

Finally, cell phone users are eliminating the leisure time spent for relaxation and stress-relief. What good is a vacation if you are constantly being reminded of the stress that you left behind? A business executive who leaves for vacation will often bring along his or her cell phone in order to be updated on events. Honeymoons that used to be private are now interrupted by friends and co-workers checking up on them (Rubin). Due to advanced communication devices, such as cell phones, leisure time is diminishing at a rapid pace. Every time a user wears a cell phone, he or she is "on call." Therefore, the diminishing effect of leisure time on "cell" societies is the most drastic social impact of cell phones.

### **Analysis of the Social Impact:**

Cell phones do have some distinct advantages. They provide access to authorities just about anywhere in range of a “cell” tower. They provide instant communication to peers, friends, children, and even co-workers or business associates. Cell phones make people feel more secure, and are becoming status symbols. But one question to ask is if the cell phone social advantages outweigh the social disadvantages?

To put things in perspective, using a cell phone to contact authorities is not always a good thing. For example, during the tragic events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, the amount of cell phone users dialing in the emergency overloaded the system. In a crisis, cell phones could actually decrease safety instead of increase it (Carr et al.). In addition to taxing the system, most cell phones are pre-programmed with a button to dial 911 automatically. According to Russ Sanderson at E-comm Inc., 40% of the thirty-five hundred 911 calls received by his office daily are unintended (Bergman et al.). Another example by the California Highway Patrol estimates that of the 7.2 million 911 calls made from cell phones yearly, 60% are for non-emergencies (Edmonds and Simitian). In San Diego, the number of 911 calls from cell phone users has tripled since 1999, causing tremendous wait times for people with emergencies (Edmonds and Simitian).

Another key disadvantage of cell phone use is that of driving hazards. Corporations are already coming under fire for irresponsible employees talking on their cell phones while driving. For example, a fatal accident by a Smith Barney Investment Firm employee in Pennsylvania resulted in a \$500,000 settlement for the relatives of a killed cyclist (Edmonds and Simitian). More and more corporations are seeing the

negative impacts of cell phones and many are warning employees not to use cell phones on the road. In addition, many states are realizing the negative impacts of having cell phones in operation while driving. New York has already passed legislation banning cell phones in cars unless they are on a “hands free” unit. However, some people will argue that it’s the “talking” on the cell phone that is the distracter and not the actual “holding” of the cell phone (Cerullo).

Finally, cell phones are on the verge of eliminating leisure time in our society. Throughout history, humans have been gaining more leisure time for themselves; however, with the advent of advanced communication devices, leisure time is being redefined. More and more people are starting to lose a “distinction between leisure and work (Mitra and Winn).” Workers who constantly use cell phones are learning that work follows them home. Workers may receive calls from their boss or clients even while they are away from the office. There is a constant possibility that a cell phone user will be interrupted during his or her “personal” time. Even if the cell phone user doesn’t use the phone for work, the user must always brave the possibility that someone may interrupt them at any moment. Such interruption of leisure time is starting to redefine what we view as leisure. Is leisure time talking on a cell phone or is it relaxing at the beach while on vacation? Cell phones and other forms of communication technology are making us redefine what we view as our “private” time, even though the time is no longer private. The interruption of leisure time on “cell” societies is the most drastic long-term social impact because it may result in burnt-out societies. With the redefining of leisure time, the taxing of the emergency system, and the driving hazards, the social disadvantages of cell phones seem to outweigh the advantages.

### **Future of the Technology:**

The cell phone is slowly becoming a multi-function gadget. Cell phones have already evolved into cameras. Some experts believe cell phones will become an all-in-one device that can do just about everything from checking your temperature to getting advice on that noise coming from your car (Technology Review). According to Tony Hillman of Sun Microsystems, the cell phone is slowly evolving into a “digital Swiss Army knife.”

Future cell phones will soon display blood pressure from patients wearing heart-monitoring devices. This feature can be beneficial for concerned family members who may want to check up on a loved one (Technology Review). Some feel that cell phones will one day be integrated into an “all-in-one” communications device with e-mail, video conferencing, instant messaging, and the Internet. Some of these features are already available for a limited number of cell phone users (Carmichael).

The future of cell phones looks bright. Cell phones will eventually become all-in-one devices. Soon GPS devices will be in all cell phones, which will provide unmatched accuracy for emergency calls. Cell phones bring communication to just about everyone’s fingertips and will continue to revolutionize the way humans communicate.

### Works Cited

- Bergman, Brian, Brenda Branswell, Danylo Hawaleshka, and Chris Wood. "The *Cell* in Your Future." Maclean's 113.49 (2000): Ebsco
- Brain, Marshall and Jeff Tyson. *How Cell Phones Work*. 2 May 2003  
<<http://electronics.howstuffworks.com/cell-phone.htm>>.
- Carr, Michael, Doug Reynolds, and Ken Trump. "Student Cell Phones: Help or Hindrance." Inside School Safety 6.9 (2002): Ebsco
- Cerullo, Bob. *The Case Against Cellphones in Cars*. 29 April 2003  
<<http://www.bobcerullo.com/Articles/CellPhones.htm>>.
- Chaisri, Jeeraporn. "Parents Glad to Give Kids Cell Phones." Nation(Thailand) (2001): Ebsco
- Costello, Daniel. "Worried Parents Buy Tech Gear to Keep Tabs on Their Kids; What's Cool, What Works." Wall Street Journal 28 Sept. 2001: Proquest
- Edmonds, Barry, and Joseph Simitian. "Talk Culture." The San Diego Union – Tribune 20 Dec. 2002: Proquest
- Fleming, Anne T. "We're Now a Nation of Non-stop Blabbers." Houston Chronicle (1999): Proquest
- Hakim, Danny. "Cellphone Use In Cars Drop, Study Says." New York Times 19 Aug. 2002: Infotrac
- Mitra, Ananda, and Walter Winn. "Cellular Phones Change Culture in America." Knight Rider Tribune Business News (2002): Proquest
- Nobel, Carmen. "Are Cell Phones Becoming Road Hazards?" eWeek 18.20 (2001): Ebsco
- "Phones Fan Out." Technology Review 105.9 (2002): Ebsco
- Plant, Sadie. "From Stone Age to Phone age." Canada Newwire (2001): Proquest
- Rubin, Bonnie M. "Technology is 'Mixed Blessing' for Executives on Vacation." Chicago Tribune 02 Sept. 2001: Ebsco
- "Telephones." Britannica Micropaedia. 1995 Ed.
- "Trenton: A Push to Curb Phone Use in Cars." New York Times 14 Oct. 2002: Infotrac