

## **Text Messaging and Personal Space**

### **By Duncan Speakman**

The telephone has always had a great impact on our personal space. It is based in the acoustic realm, the one we cannot shut our ears to, and we converse on it at a distance usually reserved for intimate friends or lovers. The unknown entity at the end of the phone could offer great reward and as such it is hard to resist its ring. Once in the vicinity of a telephone we are at its mercy. With the advent of mobile phones this call has extended into all areas of our life, we are now permanently accessible to anyone with our number.

Technology has brought us not just accessibility, but also the means to extend our control over the same privacy the telephone broke open. McLuhan's four laws of media suggest that each successful new media technology must enhance some element of our existence, make a current technology obsolete, resurrect a forgotten technology, and then reverse into the next medium.

As network prices continually diminish, it is in a position where it may replace the fixed landline. With text messaging it has resurrected the telegraph. So what has been enhanced? Our micro-coordination of activities, i.e. modification of plans, increase in mobility and therefore travel.

In addition, the facilities provided on mobile phones let us regain control of our acoustic space. The majority of mobile phones display the number of the incoming call by default, suddenly the mysterious ring is given an identity, we can prioritise it, and we can choose whether or not to answer it. The mystery of the 'withheld number' puts us in a position where we can decide if we are ready or not to deal with surprises. The problem appears when we call someone on their mobile phone. We have no way of knowing exactly what space they are in and as such we cannot decide whether they are ready to receive the kind of news we may have for them.

Text messaging brings its own influences to the phone. Although similar in form to electronic mail (which might go some way to explaining how easily people adapt to text messaging), there is something unique about our use of text on telephones. The argument over the value of text versus speech goes back to the origins of writing (see Socrates' Fable). Text is part of the fixed visual world, we read it as something unchangeable and unquestionable, as opposed to speech which we can question and interact with.

So why do we choose the static over the fluid? Text messaging does something more than bring the telegraph back from obsolescence. After deciding to refuse someone access to your ears, you can reply to them with text, forcing the communication out of your personal space and time. Communications become tighter, more 'to the point', yet we know that at any time we can flip back into verbal territory. There is also a sense that because it is on a phone, a tool of ephemeral media from which it is hard to disassociate it, the writing also becomes ephemeral. We don't bestow the same honour on a text message as we do on a letter (or for that matter an email), once it is read it falls to an 'inbox' unlikely to ever revisit the small screen again. It disappears into memory (both flesh and silicon) as quickly as words from our lips.