Editorial

Wireless technologies, mobile practices

Mobile wireless devices such as handheld PDAs, cellular telephones, and portable computers are part of a changing landscape of communications and culture. In the last decade alone the use of cellphones has increased fourfold in Canada, signalling a remarkable shift in the telecommunications industry, the convergence of a number of technologies onto a single platform, and new ways of conducting person-to-person communication and creating community. At the end of March 2008, Canadian wireless phone subscribers numbered 20.1 million, representing a national wireless adoption rate of 62%. In addition to these devices, Wi-Fi networks, Bluetooth, WANS, and GPS comprise integrated segments of the new infrastructure of the so-called wireless world as well as an emergent vocabulary for citizens and consumers globally (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Lichuan, & Sey, 2007; de Souza, 2006; Urry, 2007).

This special issue is meant to promote a local culture of inquiry into the area of wireless, mobile communications. A number of Canadian communications scholars have begun to contribute to a growing international dialogue (Gow & Smith, 2006; Caron & Caronia, 2007; Nicholson, 2006; Shade, 2007; Crow & Sawchuk, 2008). Much of this Canadian work is recent, connected perhaps to the relatively low rate of cellular uptake in Canada compared to other nations where cellphones have been embraced. The vast bulk of the research on mobile media is generated by international scholars working in countries where the diffusion of cellphones is exceptionally high or where a strong industry is present, such as Finland and Sweden (Burgess, 2004; Horst & Miller, 2006; Harper & Hamill, 2006; Ito, 2005; Katz, 2005; Kato et. al, 2005; Ling, 2004; Goggin, 2006). Indeed, some of this international scholarship is sponsored by corporations, such as Motorola, with a vested interest in promoting wireless technology (Plant, 2002), raising ethical and political challenges for researchers in the field who are increasingly asked to “partner up” with industry.

In our call for articles, we cast a wide net looking for papers on topics such as the everyday uses of mobile technologies, community wireless networks, policy, labour, art and design, and representations of mobility—to name only a few of the suggested areas. As active scholars in the field, we were keen to take the pulse of the current research in Canada and to provide a critical intervention in the increasingly deregulated telecommunications industry.

The mix of articles selected for the issue bring to the forefront a number of key areas in the burgeoning field of mobile-media technologies including the continued relevance of an historical perspective to the study of new technologies; the place of an analysis of race and gender in shaping these technologies; the question of work and the new requirements that employees are “always there”; the new ways that news services are impacted by these new platforms; and, finally, they...
highlight the role played by imaginative artistic and the everyday cultural practices of users which utilize these technologies—or their images—to do different things than may be intended by either industry or government.

The first article by Ghislain Thibault and Thierry Bardini, “Éther 2.0: Révolutions sans fil,” draws attention to the distinction between the ways in which the discourses on wireless technology embody both “promise” and “myth.” Casting an historical lens on both the idea of ether and first wireless revolution (during the invention of radio at the turn of the 20th century) and the “invention” of mobilities in the decades prior to the turn of the 21st century, the authors eloquently examine how our understanding of myth allow us to “bet on the future.”

Judith Nicholson’s article, “Calling Dick Tracy! or, Cellphone Use, Progress, and a Racial Paradigm,” analyzes the “shadow history” of wireless telephony by invoking the familiar image of Dick Tracy speaking into his wristwatch. Analyzing the depiction of the comic-book character created by Chester Gould in the 1940s, Nicholson reminds readers of the post-war and social context in which this technology was envisioned and questions the repetition of the motif of Dick Tracy in contemporary discussions of cellphone technology. Nicholson’s piece makes explicit the ways in which wireless telephony is articulated to practices of policing, surveillance, and a history of racist and sexist representations.

Working from within a Deleuzo-Guattarian reflection on territoriality and the refrain, Darren Werschler reflects on one of the most successful wireless art projects in Canada, [murmur]. [murmur] was developed by Gabe Sawhney and Shawn Micallef during a residency at the Canadian Film Centre’s CFC New Media Lab. This artistic and community project takes up the simplest of wireless technologies and one of the longest human practices, storytelling, and merges these in a city-wide installation in Toronto. [murmur] consists of a series of street signs and a series of accompanying audio recordings. Individuals have been invited to tell their stories of a place that are then recorded and edited. A passer-by can dial a number with their mobile phone to hear someone recount their story of that particular location. Now a multi-city art installation project, [murmur] has been installed the world over. An image from one of [murmur]’s Toronto installations graces the cover of this issue.

Isabel Pedersen examines another street scene, linking mobility to the urban environment and the national context. Embroiling herself in the debates on participatory culture, Pedersen’s article, “‘No Apple iPhone? You Must Be Canadian’: Mobile Technologies, Participatory Culture, and Rhetorical Transformation,” provides an analysis of “participatory culture” as it is experienced through Apple’s iPods and iPhones. In her rhetorical analysis of the visual style, and responses to Apple’s advertising campaigns, Pedersen examines consumer reactions to both iPods and iPhones in Canada. Her reading of the transition from the iPod to the iPhone reveals the fascinating ways in which the two types of devices were linked, explicitly, to either the worlds of play or work in advertising. Pedersen then turns her attention to the Canadian responses to their exclusion from the consumer market of the iPhones in 2007. iPhones were not initially available in Canada and fostered a round of “excluded Canadian” rhetoric in the popular media during the
summer and fall of 2007. From the editors’ point of view, this article nicely situates the mobile device in the media and cultural environment and provides a useful contrast to the more common technological and business analyses that often surround mobile technologies.

Sam Ladner’s piece, “Laptops in the Living Room: Mobile Technologies and the Divide between Work and Private Time among Interactive Agency Works,” exploring how mobile devices are used in the emerging industry of interactive design agencies, is one of the first of its kind. Building on the work of McKercher and Mosco (2006) and the research conducted by Cukier and Middleton (2006) on Blackberries, Ladner shows how this industry, much like the video-game industry, relies on young and energetic individuals with sophisticated digital skills: most of her respondents were under 30 with no children. In her case study, she interviews and observes employees from the bottom of this industry's hierarchy to the top. What she finds is that the mobile phone has not only become a requirement for the industry, but a status symbol as well. The telling moment from requirement to status is imparted to an employee when they no longer have to pay for “always being there.”

In their article, “Building Wi-Fi Networks for Communities: Three Canadian Cases,” Catherine Middleton and Barbara Crow examine the development and implementation of three very distinct Wi-Fi networks in Canada to reflect on these networks in relation to the literature on “public utilities.” It is their position that the successful implementation of Wi-Fi networks is context-aware and often dependent on the work of individual advocates to develop and sustain the technical and economic bases of these networks. While earlier discussions of public utilities were focused on the provision of services what distinguishes Wi-Fi networks from previous utilities is their implicit and explicit ability to facilitate user creation, production, and dissemination in the realm of communications.

Oscar Westlund surveys the use of news media online in Sweden, where many people own more than one mobile phone. In a large-scale, time-based study, Westlund tracks mobile phone users’ take-up of news media online. As expected, he finds that older users are less likely to use mobile devices to read the news and younger ones are more likely to utilize these features. However, what is most interesting about his study is the finding that users do not want to pay for these services for they are not yet satisfied with the mobile delivery of online news. Younger people are not as interested in traditional news and do not want to pay for access to it. Older people are more likely to rely on traditional delivery of news in print and on television.

Our reports and commentary round out the issue. Two of these contributions, one from Potter, Middleton, and McIntyre “How Usable Are Outdoor Wireless Networks?” and the other from Martha Ladly, “Designing for Mobile: A Walk in the Park,” provide readers with material examples of outdoor wireless technologies. The former focuses on the fragility of Wi-Fi signals in densely populated areas while the latter points to their operation in unexpected ways in her exploration of the mobile media design project, Park Walk. Marusya Bociurkiw’s commentary “Put on Your Bunny Ears, Take Your TV around the
Block: Old and New Discourses of Gender and Nation in Mobile, Digital, and HDTV,” brings together research on television studies to reflect on mobility and mobile technologies foreshadowing some of the issues that will recur in the forthcoming CJC on “Reality TV.”

We end this editorial with a list of useful policy-related sites on wireless communications, kindly furnished by Gordon Gow, an active member of the CJC Editorial Board.2 There are a myriad of forthcoming policy issues in the area that demand that we pay close attention to the wireless industry including the (original, and ongoing) “forbearance” from regulation of cellular; the regulation and (recently) auctioning of spectrum; the most recent auctions and the rules that were designed to bring in new entrants (new spectrum reserved, roaming required, tower sharing mandated); the debate about “white space” (unused TV channels) that spills over from the US and results from the transition to digital TV; the potential for “software radios” to run in unregulated spectrum, potentially removing much regulation; the vast swatches of spectrum that are unused or lightly used because they are reserved for military and other government use; various policies relating to emergency response; the need for Canada to coordinate with the world (ITU) and the U.S. (FCC) because of the physical properties of the spectrum not respecting boundaries and because most Canadians live so close to the U.S. border. Related to this, we wonder if Canadians might eventually see MORE regulation of the industry given the a) monopolistic/oligopolistic behaviour of the big carriers, and b) the growing importance—it is no longer a “luxury”—of cellular telephones for youth and transient business people.

In the context of recent spectrum auctions, the increased deregulation of the telecommunication industries, the high cost of mobile phone use, wireless technologies and mobile practices, and most of all because of the growing proliferation and dependency of this technology world-wide, such issues need our intellectual interrogation and close attention.

Notes
1. Recent CWTA research estimates wireless penetration in major urban centres has exceeded 70%, with some greater metropolitan areas approaching the 80% mark. http://www.cwta.ca/ CWTASite/english/index.html.
2. Gow’s research focuses on the use of wireless technologies by institutions for relaying emergency news and his blog provides news and some analysis on current issues in communications technology and public safety: http://10-43.net.

References


Policy related websites

Australian Communications and Media Authority: http://www.acma.gov.au
Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association (CWTA): http://www.cwta.ca/
CWTASite/english/index.html
EUROPA portal is a good place to start for EU-related information: http://europa.eu/pol/infsoc
Gordon Gow’s blog provides news and some analysis on current issues in communications technology and public safety: http://10-43.net
International Telecommunication Union Radiocommunication Sector (ITU-R) provides information on wireless issues and developments at an international level. This can get pretty technical but it helps to understand how spectrum and standards are set: http://www.itu.int/ITU-R
New America Foundation’s Wireless Future Program offers videos and reports on emerging issues (U.S.-focused but providing context for Canada): http://www.newamerica.net/programs/wireless_future
The archives of the TPRC (formerly the Telecommunications Policy Research Conference) provide a good source of papers on current telecom policy issues (U.S. focus, but many issues will be relevant for Canada too): http://www.tprcweb.com/node/24

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Kim Sawchuk, Concordia University
Richard Smith, Simon Fraser University