

Abstract

Videophonie – Einfluss, Prägung, Zukunft
(Videophones – Influence, Impact, Future)

The multi media phones that were announced a couple of years ago seem poised to conquer the global market in the near future. My work focuses on the effects that these phones will have on users behaviour, in particular I am focussing on the effect of the integrated video camera.

Already 65 million German citizens own ordinary mobile phones.¹ Service providers are advertising the first mobile phones that have integrated UMTS technology.² This 3rd generation of mobile phones, also called "3G", offer the user a permanent broadband level content (such as audio, video and Internet access directly into the palm of your hand). The now 'standard' mobile phone functions such as telephone, agenda, address book, radio and the playback of music, are complemented with Internet, live video streams, asynchronous video message and synchronous video chat.³

One of the defining features of the 3G phones is the integrated video camera. What effect will these video phones have on behaviour when users communicate? How will these phones affect the user's perception of reality with the displayed visual information? It's less the assertion that the user isn't accustomed yet to the opportunity of video telephony and to be acquainted with it (a minority at least) but more the exploration of how the user has to rethink all his/her knowledge and experience with the advent of "mobile video telephony". How will the majority of the users react to this possibility to communicate if they can be connected visually in real time from any place and any situation to any other user in any other place?

Visual real time communication has noticeably been explored in the past. The main idea of this communication channel was already available in the 1980s with the video telephone but somehow it never seemed to be completely "accepted" by the end consumer.⁴ The videoconference as well, developed since the 20s in the 20th century parallel to the television, remained unsuccessful until the early 1990s.⁵ Due to financial reasons the videoconference was reserved for business use, and therefore was unlikely to stray into the private user's realm of use.

However, the awareness of this communication channel has been increasing - by the means of daily news broadcasts on television. Correspondents are being interviewed via Live-transmission at home and abroad. These live hook ups bring us to the scene, into the war zone or major event and create an image of the 'reality' for the viewer at home to consume. At this point there is a strong connection to the industry and service providers that are "preparing" users gradually by demonstrating the technical possibilities and seducing them for later utilisation.

Based on this history and technology the user's daily perception of space and time will change in the same way due to the augmented reality presented by such a rich, new experience. In this case "mixed reality" is the result of the combination between the real world and the digital audio-visual media that are surrounding the user.

Using scientific and experimental studies this work describes the influence the mobile phone has had in the past years on the daily habits of the user. Following from this, both social and cultural impacts are discussed as well as the way the user can and will interact with the medium. It also needs to be established why the videoconference with the video telephone in the past didn't find favour with the end users.

From the theoretical point of view this work is based on Bertolt Brecht's radio theory. In parallel it needs to be questioned if the video phone can be used in the future only for receiving information or if there are possibilities to use it as a communication tool to communicate to the masses. The proposition at this stage is that one day the

¹ Dworschak, *Leben auf Empfang*, 2004, p. 106-108

² UMTSWorld, *3G Tutorial, UMTS Overview*, 2003

³ An asynchronous video message is like an SMS (Short Message Service) the delayed communication between users. A synchronous video service points at the communication run in real time between two users.

⁴ Not to be mistaken with a video phone that is a mobile phone with internal video technology.

⁵ Wikipedia, *Videokonferenz über IP*, 2004

video phone will be similar to the PC, and could be used as a mass medium. McLuhan's theory of perception is a second important basis to describe how and why the video phone is becoming an extension of the human body. The result of the permanent integration of this device in the everyday life with functions like agenda, telephone book or alarm clock seems to be clear: what was technically and communicatively separated before, phone calls (audio) and static images (EMS⁶) will be combined as an audio-visual channel that in the future can be regarded and treated as an independent process of communication: video telephony.

This novel process of communication might seem to the present generation of mobile phone users like an add-on to the existing functions. For the younger generation however, video telephony will become a daily communication channel. It's obvious that there will be no reasons at all for them to question this channel of communication as other generations accepted the telegram, the letter or the telephone.

As these communication techniques become more and more affordable the population will be given the opportunity to become part of a technological, cultural and communicative process. In Germany and other industrial nations there are just a few who have to live without television, telephone or PC and more and more people have a mobile phone. Sometimes the mobile phone is used as the only device used for telephony. The medium of the movie, seen by Walter Benjamin as an unnatural medium for the spectator⁷ was reconsidered half a century later, following Paul Virilio's model for further discussions, as a natural continuation of the human vision.⁸ Technology in everyday life is normal. Almost everybody possesses and uses it. The increasing presence of technology seems to make no difference for the majority of the users or, with the advice of Virilio, it is seen as a "natural" step.

Analysing the development from the mobile phone to the video phone, that is striving to ubiquity as well, it is to question if this technology in the case of global diffusion can provoke global convergence instead of divergence. A possible answer leans towards the latter case as the video phone like the PC, PDA or the mobile phone are part of the group of devices that rather increase within the man-machine-relation psychological, social and cultural divergences than to decrease them.⁹ Their multifunctional utilisation empowers them by what they retrospectively can influence and define the user's behaviour and both his social and cultural articulation.¹⁰

The developed applications within the framework of this work shall be e.g. recover the lost private and public space that was taken by the influence of a video phone with its use. The user of a video phone can bilateral visual communication let happen whereby he cannot substitute traditional and for men essential exchange at physical vicinity. That means for the process of communication during a video call that the felt sensation of vicinity can rapidly swing back to disappointment. The suggested vicinity via telepresence is taken over by the intrinsic characteristics of the device. In this case socio-cultural boundaries cannot be vanquished.

The psychology of cognition is offering here a way out of these problems: every user has to deal with the content provided with the transmitted videos offering possible cognitive and perceptual potential. Self-reflection, critical observing of the interlocutor and the situation of communication are therefore indispensable. What does the user perceive and how is he being perceived. „Nihil in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensibus.“¹¹ Within this process of cognition only deductive thinking is possible based on the user's sensory perceptions that were acquired in the context of individual learning and cultural backgrounds.¹² The fantasy that is not only standing for his imagination but also for his illusions can easily provoke distortions of the impression of reality if the things seen are not correspondent to knowledge and acquisition.

Within the practical part, applications social domains and spaces of the user's interactions are systematically analysed to discover in which areas the video phone can have a strong influence due its value and functionality. The behaviour of the user with the video phone causes not only reflexive reactions but also reactions at his conversational partner that are being forced by the video image. The possibilities to cause respective reactions show that perception of reality, culture and ideology can also be changed, influenced and even be manipulated.

⁶ EMS (Enhanced Messaging Service). Service to send and receive simple pictures, sounds and animations along with formatted texts.

⁷ Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, 1984, p. 487

⁸ Manovich, *The language of new media*, 2001, p. 173

⁹ Geser, *Towards a Sociological Theory of the Mobile Phone*, 2004, p. 41

¹⁰ Schmidt, *Medien: Die Kopplung von Kommunikation und Kognition*, 1998, p. 69

¹¹ lat. „Nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses.“

¹² Schumacher, *Das Gehirn und seine Welt - Wahrnehmen und Erkennen als Konstruktionsprozesse*, 2004

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