

**"The person you have called is not available":
Personal, institutional and social spheres in the
mobile-phone age**

The dissertation deals with the relationship between communication technology, control, and social boundaries. The research studies how penetration of a communication technology – in this case the cellular phone – causes the breakdown and restructuring of physical and symbolic boundaries in the life of the individual, the organization, and the social group. The mobile phone, being portable and carried on one's person, transforms its user into a communication terminal, severely limiting his or her options for withdrawing from her surroundings, whether by choice, necessity, or even forcibly.

The possibility of 24/7 communication that this medium offers challenges traditional social boundaries and threatens the existence of solitary space, i.e., the physical or mental state of being alone in an environment while retreating from other environments. The dissertations' chapters examine respectively the challenge that this medium presents to individuals, social groups, and organizations in their attempts to preserve spaces of solitude, and their coping practices facing this new communication reality. In a certain sense, the question underlying this study is: What does today's wired communication climate structure in the solitary spaces of yesterday?

This effect of the mobile phone is discussed in the paper regarding three social contexts: (a) the individual and his or her ability to voluntarily be present with others in an environment alongside seclusion and retreat from other environments; (b) the social group, with an emphasis on groups characterized by their members' seclusion from the surrounding culture and society, such as the Amish, the Jewish ultra-Orthodox, and certain Islamic sects. These groups view the links that the mobile phone enables as a serious threat to their ability to preserve their boundaries and ensure their survival as cultural enclaves; (c) the organization, focusing on Goffman's "total institutions", i.e. organizations characterized by a hierarchical, authoritarian

structure and a climate that cuts off those in it coercively or with the assent of the surrounding society for the purpose of enabling a process of socialization. For such organizations – examples being armies, prisons, and closed wards, in contrast to schools – the diffusion of cellular communication constitutes a threat to their control over the intra-organizational climate and to demarcating the individual in defined time and space.

The dissertation sets forth the challenges that the mobile phone presents to each of these contexts, as well as the strategies employed in facing these challenges in the attempt to preserve solitude in a changing communication reality. As per this structure, the paper's five sections discuss three test cases that respectively illustrate the three aforementioned levels: the individual (section 1), the social group (sections 2-3), and the organization (sections 4-5).

Section 1 addresses the function of the mobile phone for backpackers. At its base, the backpacker moratorium on cellular is motivated by escapism that strives toward solitude and distancing from one's everyday environment, and the backpack experience constitutes an example of retreat that enables the individual full and sole presence in the space and time that s/he occupies at any given moment (being "in the moment"). While, creating solitary space on one's journey – both physical and mental – is critical to the "time-out" experience of backpacking, the presence of the phone on the backpacker's person severely limits the possibility of the individual's "communication blackout" from his or her routine daily experience.

By means of questionnaires (N = 105) and in-depth interviews (N = 14), Section 1 examines the place of cellular in shaping the backpacking experience and the significance of usage practices and avoidance thereof. The findings show that a large group (30%) of the backpackers choose not to take their devices with them at all, and even those who do make an attempt to reduce availability and achieve maximum control over the scale and timing of communication.

Abstention practices stem from structuring a personal narrative of the backpack experience as one of escapist retreat, and as an attempt to preserve the trip as an "unplugged" island in a technology-saturated climate. In addition, it was found that backpackers place great value on their parents' positions when deciding whether

or not to take their devices with them. Moreover, parents are the main address or “terminal” for the backpackers’ cellular communication. In this context, the study seeks to expand the discussion surrounding the metaphor of mobile phone as transitional object by reconfiguring such objects’ function in early childhood and adolescence to the twenties and thirties, i.e., backpacker age range. On yet another plane, the paper addresses the unique function of the mobile phone in the backpacker community as an anti-status symbol, in a switch from its everyday context.

Sections 2 and 3 deal with the social group level, with the Israeli ultra-Orthodox community as a test case, while focusing on the phenomenon of “kosher cellular”, or devices that are “sterile” or can be used for voice calls only. One section (Chapter 2 in the dissertation) looks at the ultra-Orthodox view of cellular as a threat, and focuses on the rabbis’ and lay leaders’ not stopping at blocking Internet use and content services (seen as dangerous) from phones, but also blocking texting. The texting was recently prohibited also against “kosher smartphones”, in order to block text-based apps such as WhatsApp and Viber. Using cross-interviews with the anti-cellular crusaders and content analysis of online discussions held between community members, the study examines the perception of threat that underlies the prohibition against texting, and how this prohibition is accepted in the community.

The findings show that in contrast to the matter of permissive content, which threatens the isolated community’s external boundaries, blocking texting stems from a perception that the technology’s *configuration* threatens the intra-communal monitorability of inter-gender relations and of information dissemination in the communal space. Regarding the gender relations aspect, the unique properties of texting enable initiating intimate relations in ways that are inconsistent with the community’s values. On the community plane, the threat stems from the potential of texting to reach mass levels, as its emergence as a social network enables creating and disseminating information by any user, unmonitored, in a society wherein mass communication is tightly controlled. In light of these findings, I propose another facet of the interface between new media, religious communities, and social control, alongside expanding the discussion from the challenge that communication content

presents to religious communities: dealing with challenges of configuration and interface.

To further address this matter, the next section (Chapter 3 of the dissertation) examines the public ultra-Orthodox campaign to minimize the cellular threat, and the contribution to this campaign of *pashkevilim* in the battle for kosher cellular. By means of a content analysis of pashkevilim posted as part of this campaign (N = 70), it can be seen how the campaign's organizers make intelligent use of the pashkevil's unique properties (anonymity, overtness, and the specific geographic context of their placement) for the purpose of persuading community members to absorb the complex message of the cellular threat. The pashkevil serves the community leadership in its effort to frame the battle as a grassroots struggle, as it serves as a tool for disseminating messages to target audiences such as women, teenagers, and yeshiva pupils. The specific context of the pashkevil's dissemination serves as focused enforcement against the "rebellious" cellular service points, and its non-formal nature enables attacking community members that do not comply with prohibitions.

Another finding relates to the unique appearance of pashkevils that combine text and pictures, a new, modern-day format that itself challenges the genre's traditional boundaries. The pashkevil's appearance in this context is discussed in terms of the anti-cellular campaign's content, which is focused on the crusade against the new medium. These findings point to the pashkevil's role in this context as a communication channel that functions as a supplement to the institutional press, which is at odds with the pashkevil's image heretofore as an alternative, subversive, and anti-establishment medium. This section discusses this aspect in light of the complex nature of the battle for the kosher cellphone, and the pashkevil's significant role therein as a traditional and familiar communication channel, and as helping to "tame" the new and threatening medium known as the cellular phone.

Sections 4 and 5 deal with the organizational level, focusing on the IDF as a test case of a total institution with defined boundaries and a clear hierarchy that firmly establishes its ability to control its members' cutoff from civilian everyday life. The possession of the mobile phone by soldiers presents a genuine challenge to the organization's ability to preserve its physical and symbolic boundaries, not to mention

its character as a total institution. Section 4 focuses on basic training, which manifests to an extreme the total aspect of the military. From in-depth interviews (N = 15) with new recruits and their commanders, it emerges that the presence of cellular challenges a number of basic components in the army's functioning as a total institution. Cellular enables intensive contact between the recruit and the civilian world and particularly his or her parents, thus dulling the power of the experience of coerced cutoff and compromising the process of military socialization. Parent involvement manifests also in exploiting commanders' availability via cellular, as the commanders are compelled to cope with many phone inquiries by soldiers' parents. This phenomenon is perceived by the commanders – particularly by junior staff – as undesirable intervention into the organization's external authority, and as a threat to the intra-organizational hierarchical structure.

On another level, cellular-enabled availability enables the junior staff to contact the command level frequently, which compromises the former's independent decision-making ability in the field and his or her socialization as a commander. On the group level, the personal nature of the medium is manifested inter alia in private consumption of content, encouraging individualism and compromising the combat unit's *esprit de corps*, which is perceived as one of the central objectives of military socialization. It emerges from the study that the mobile device's physical nature on the one hand, and the psychological dependency that develops from its use on the other, make it difficult for the organization to take strategic measures to cope with this technology successfully.

The next section deals with the cellphone's role in the 2nd Lebanon War, in which soldiers for the first time went into battle with their phones. Via in-depth interviews (N = 12) with officers and combat soldiers, the study shows how soldiers' cellular devices served a range of objectives: military, personal documentary, communication with home and family, and updating the home front and other battle sectors. On the military level, cellular enables the generation of the "cellular buddy" phenomenon, or the ability to consult with extra-organizational parties – such as friends who are former senior officers – which led to impeding the army's internal chain of command.

On the personal-experiential level, this section presents the “availability conflict” that the soldiers described, between their desire to be in touch with home during the war and the high price thereof. Full-time availability and the lack of ability to disconnect “brings” the home front, the home, and the family directly to the battlefield, thus affecting the soldiers’ already-complex experiential and mental state. Certain phone calls were experienced by the soldiers as difficult separation, and more than a few soldiers – despite having their devices on them – therefore chose not to use them. Even from the standpoint of civilians on the home front, the fact of soldiers having phones on some occasions intensified their fears, as the soldier’s being out of touch – even temporarily – was experienced as “bad news”. In light of these findings, the section discusses how cellphones contribute to the continuing blurring of boundaries between the IDF and the civilian world. It is even argued that the study’s findings reinforce the claims of researchers that in certain situations, cellphones enable the individual to evade – and occasionally even violate – the organization’s established hierarchy.

The conclusion discusses the picture that the findings reveal according to which the presence of cellular calls into question the ability of individuals, social groups, and total institutions to preserve literal and figurative boundaries in a wired world, not to mention the existence of solitary social spaces. The conclusion addresses the possible meanings of the dissertation as a whole and its contribution to research on cellular. The discussion surrounds three themes that serve as central touchpoints in the field of cellular research, and the aforementioned sections also highlight: (a) The “connection-disconnection” dichotomy; (b) The “freedom-bondage” dichotomy; (c) The metaphor of cellphone as transitional object. The discussion claims that regarding each of these touchpoints, the findings that emerge from the present article enable expansion of the psychological and social significances embedded in the cellular medium as they apply to other spaces: from interpersonal to institutional and group contexts; from physical to experiential spaces, and from evidence of implications such as those caused by cellular content, to those that stem from the very fact of its presence and its being carried on the user’s person.