

**Cellular Phones as a primary communications device: What are the implications for a global community?**

**Bill Clark**

**Clafin University, Orangeburg, SC**

**Abstract**

Recent statistics show that more individuals communicate with cellular phones than with any other device. Mobile is seen by many media analysts as its own medium with its own defining characteristics. This hand-held technology has people not only talking, texting and blogging, but shopping, banking and reporting. Individuals are so dependent upon phones that the device has become critical in many aspects of everyday life. The mobile technology has empowered a global community of techno savvy consumers known as Generation C. Generation C is not defined by age or nationality, but by an insatiable appetite for all things digital. This discussion will present evidence of a global dependence on cellular phones, and what this means for educators, marketers, consumers and media practitioners.

Keywords: Cellular Phones, Generation C, Digital Communication, Internet, Texting

## **Introduction**

Cellular phones have touched so many lives in so many ways. With the far reaching influence of these devices, how can we place a discussion on cellular phones into some sort of reasonable context? We can start our discussion by recognizing cellular phones as an essential communications device. And it truly is. If you did not have a cellular phone, there would be certain communication options that would be unavailable. We can also reflect on the classic communications model, and talk about cellular phones as a medium in which the message from sender to receiver is digitally enhanced and altered on a constant basis. And, as the role of mobile devices clearly transcends the function of mere message distribution, cellular phones will be presented here as a critical part of the lives of millions with various applications. This discussion will attempt to demonstrate the true impact of cellular phones as a device, a communication medium, and as an agent of change in a global society.

## **A Recent Revolution**

Mobile telephones are a relatively new device. In the early 1980s, car phones and transportable bag phones started to emerge. Wireless industry advocate CTIA (2013) recently recognized the 25th anniversary of the first commercial wireless phone call. The transmission originated from the Soldier Field in Chicago. October 13, 1983. Over the past 25 years the way the world communicates truly has changed. There are now more wireless phones than wired ones. As of 2012, CTIA reports that there are more cellular phones than people in many parts of the world. Not only are more people communicating via cellular phones than by any other mode,

but more people are using the phones to access the internet than personal computers. In just 25 years, we have come from no cell phones to “cellular” as the people’s choice.

CTIA also states that, in 2012 there were 321.7 million wireless subscribers in the United States. This figure is particularly significant in that there are now more cell phones than people in America! The number of wireless subscribers increases everyday.

### **A Device Dependency**

People use their cellular phones for so many things that the devices are often personal extensions. Usages like internet access, electronic messaging, texting, blogging, E-Books, social networking, music downloads, movie downloads and taking pictures all fall within the area of expected digital media distribution. In the *Cell Phone Activities 2012 Report*, The Pew Research Center (2012) elaborated on usage trends. The study noted that 85 percent of Americans had access to cellular phones. Younger individuals are more likely to use cellular phones. Mobile use increases significantly every year. The report contained details on how cellular phones are part of the lifestyles of all ages. Listed among the top cell phone activities were taking pictures and texting.

#### **Top Cell Phone Activities**

- Taking a Picture
- Sending and Receiving Text Messages
- Accessing Internet

- Recording Video
- Downloading Apps
- Looking for Health or Medical Information On-line
- On-line Banking

**Source: *Cell Phone Activities 2012 Pew Research Center Report* ([www.pewinternet.com](http://www.pewinternet.com)).**

Cellular phones are also critical in the distribution or redistribution of other media. Television, radio, newspaper, books, magazines, and movies all have extensions into the consumer world via mobile devices. Digital Book World (2013) reports a significant number of E-books are viewed by smartphone users, although tablets and pads dominate. Games on cellular phones are common. Activities such as *Angry Birds* have been created especially for phones.

Few could have seen utilities going far beyond media applications to include banking, shopping, maps, alarms, schedule management, and more. Every day there is a new application for your phone to allow you to complete another task.

The ability to gather information via cellular phones has also developed an entirely new form of journalism. Today, pictures and video can be recorded and uploaded instantly. Grassroots journalism, the process of reporting community news, has become cyberjournalism. Cyberjournalism is the collecting of story content via mobile devices and instantly uploading it to the web (Cyberjournalist.Net, 2013) The digital collecting and distribution of information has

changed the way news is reported. It is fairly commonplace to view a CNN (2013) i Report, or view an uploaded cellphone report on a local or national news broadcast.

With cellular phones being everywhere, the media is potentially there as well.

### **The Ubiquitous Nature**

With all of the uses, cellular phones are everywhere. In public, people are constantly talking on cell phones. So many people are texting, and texting and driving, that laws had to be developed to stop the practice. Cellular phones are now a part of emergency communication plans. Most colleges have programs that allow students and faculty to register to receive emergency notifications and official information from the school. Phones are now more accepted in the classroom. Realizing that faculty can no longer separate the student from the phone, academicians such as Burns and Lohenry (2010) are trying to find ways to develop a cellular phone protocol for students and faculty. Schachter (2009) sought to find ways to utilize cellular phones to overcome technology deficiencies in middle school. Educators are finding that cell phones in the classroom are valuable as a means to distribute course information and as a forum for feedback. There are applications (Apps) for everything. Layar (2013) is an augmented reality App that enhances print by allowing consumers to view digitally superimposed content in the real world. This is an example of a cellular phone App that enhances another media; in this case print. Other Apps allow cellular phone holders to listen to radio, watch television, read books, access banking information, and get directions. It is this seemingly infinite plethora of Apps that connects the consumer to the world.

We have discussed cellular phones as a primary communications device, and more. Now we consider mobile as media itself.

### **The Seventh Media**

Different media have evolved throughout history. They all are related to each other, and have certain characteristics in common. As mobile emerges as a medium the same rules apply. Not only does mobile utilize the same formats as previous media, but it also serves to redistribute the content of other media. Mobile uses words, pictures, music, and sound like other media. Entire content segments of radio stations, television station, or musical recordings can be redistributed via cellular phones. Other media have done this in the past. News has transitioned from print to radio to television to internet, for example. Music has progressed from live bands playing in person, to studio performances at radio stations, to recordings, to digital data transfers. Media content continues to be sought by consumers. The mobile medium allows the distribution to be faster, more enhanced, and more convenient than previous methods.

### **The Seven Mass Media**

<b>First Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Print</b>
<b>Second Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Recordings</b>
<b>Third Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Cinema</b>
<b>Fourth Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Radio</b>

<b>Fifth Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Television</b>
<b>Sixth Mass Media Channel -</b>	<b>Internet</b>
<b>Seventh Mass Media Channel</b>	<b>Mobile</b>

**Source: Ahonen *Mobile as the 7th of the Mass Media (2008)***

The characteristics that define mobile as a medium truly set it apart from other information delivery systems. Print works with words and pictures. Radio works with sounds. Television and movies work with moving pictures. The internet developed favor as an “interactive” medium. The defining principle of mobile is “connectivity.”

**Mobile is wireless.** The fact that cellular phones are wireless means that they are extremely portable. They go where we go. Our phones are always with us. As networks go global, phones will continue to develop true global access.

**Mobile is convenient.** One of the reasons for the staggering growth of cellular phones has been the convenience. Now everything comes to the user. A consumer watches television, listens to music, downloads content, and utilizes services all on his or her schedule.

**Mobile is immediate.** Communication occurs instantly through connecting directly to someone’s personal communication device. Texting, instant messaging and web searches are designed to occur immediately.

**Mobile is personal.** Your cellular phone is your personal communication device. A phone keeps your schedule, remembers your contacts, and can be personalized to suit you. With its unique set of characteristics, mobile serves the consumer like no other medium.

Due to its involvement in so many functions of daily life, Ahenen (2008) has argued that mobile is the most powerful medium. Among the effects of this emerging mobile medium are the development of global digital communities and Generation C.

### **Generation C**

One of the results of all of this technology is that it has changed the way that people interact. Mobile technology has empowered a global community of techno savvy consumers known as Generation C. The “C” is for connected. Generation C is not defined by age or nationality, but by an insatiable appetite for all things digital. Imagine if you will a two year old being entertained by an *Angry Birds* game on a cellphone, and mastering a swipe technique that clears the introductory levels. Think about 70 plus year-olds who use cellular phones to keep up with family and friends on facebook and other social networks. Generation C is a digital community, not a demographic. Research giant Nielsen (2012) who has spent decades measuring media markets lauds Generation “C” as the most connected consumer group in history. Connectivity that started with personal computers allowing internet access has evolved to smartphones providing connections to a plethora of consumer services.

The formation of digital communities is a natural emergence of connectivity. Ahomen and Moore (2005) describe the development of digital communities. These communities support



global communication networks as well as world-wide consumer groups. In their presentation the “C” stands for community. The community they speak of is the “digital” community. The principles are the same. The common thread is connectivity. The power of the cellular phone now allows us to be connected to each other like never before. As technology and the availability of information becomes more profound, care must be taken to ensure that all citizens can adequately navigate the digital environment. Advancing digital literacy will improve the distribution of technology and equitable access. Not only must users be aware of how digital devices work, but also become knowledgeable of how digital communication system function. (Eshet, 2004). The emergence of technology has propelled holders into a high speed world of global information.

### **The implications for the Future**

There is little doubt that technology and the ways we communicate will continue to change. It is important as educators and media practitioners that we fully embrace not only technology, but the resulting engagement in the global digital community. Cellular phones will continue to be disruptive at times. The new technologies will periodically present challenges that we are not ready to deal with. At the same time, the opportunities to produce and receive content instantly in a global marketplace make this an exciting time to live in. Digital communication has also shown itself to be a valuable asset in the distribution of information in a number of settings. Education is one. The potential for student-instructor interaction is limitless. New technologies allow additional options in the distribution of information. The reach of cellular

phones will continue to grow, Digital applications will continue to expand, and the mastery of the devices will increase. Digital literacy is a major challenge today. And, its importance will only grow. With our major communications medium being mobile, more individuals, organizations and businesses need to be acquainted with digital applications and how to use them. The challenge to established media professionals is to work to increase digital literacy throughout the global community to be sure that no segment is unserved, or underserved.

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### Biography

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Bill Clark currently serves as a Mass Communications Department faculty member at Claflin University, and is the station manager of the school's internet radio station. Bill also produces multimedia projects, and is active in various media projects in Orangeburg and Atlanta. Recent endeavors include the development of a sports broadcasting program at Claflin University, and research in communications technology. Bill is also a doctoral candidate pursuing a Doctor of Education degree at Walden University. [wilclark@claflin.edu](mailto:wilclark@claflin.edu)