Cell phones are rewiring our social connections

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The telephone, TV, personal computer and Internet have found revolutionary ways to connect people, entertain them and empower them.

But nothing has matched the seismic cultural shift created by the cell phone, with its ability to connect and deliver content virtually anywhere, anytime. Although most of us have grown familiar with cell phones during the past 10 years, we often don't realize how much our world has been transformed by the little device in our pockets and purses.

But now a number of surveys, studies and industry statistics provides a better glimpse of how this gadget has pushed us into new realms.

In anecdotal evidence that surveys are only beginning to reflect, we are starting to see how cell phone use is upending existing social rules and creating a new culture that worships mobility and modifying -- if not replacing in some instances -- many long-held social rules that govern the use of land-line phones.

That rapidly evolving culture is evident in instances in which people think nothing of engaging in a cell phone conversation in a bathroom or a restaurant. Couples flirt via text messaging and say they have interrupted sex to pick up a cell phone call.

"I don't think there is a precedent for something that has spread so quickly around the world to so many individuals; we're talking about 2 billion phones around the world," said Howard Rheingold, digital journalism professor at Stanford University and author of "Smart Mobs." Rheingold calls it "an intimate technology that has the capability to reach into your intimate zone and it brings up a lot of emotions with it."

No other recent invention has so quickly earned so much praise -- and scorn. According to a 2004 MIT survey, the cell phone topped the list of inventions people hated the most but can't live without, with 30 percent of the respondents putting themselves in that category. That beat out the alarm clock (25 percent) and the television (23 percent).

In a 2005 study by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, 83 percent of respondents said cell phones have made life easier, besting the Internet in second place at 76 percent. But an additional 60 percent said they find cell phones somewhat irritating when used in public.

A study by Telephia, a mobile industry tracker, found that Americans used their phone an average of almost 13 hours a month -- with users ages 18 to 24 racking up close to 22 hours of cell phone talk time a month.

In a 2005 international survey of more than 3,000 people by BBDO Worldwide, an advertising agency, 75 percent of Americans said they had the phone turned on and within reach during their waking hours.

According to the BBDO survey, 15 percent of Americans have interrupted sex to answer a cell phone call. It also found that 59 percent of us wouldn't think of lending our cell phone to a friend for a day. Another 26 percent said that a cell phone was more important to go home to retrieve than a wallet.
According to December 2005 data by M:Metrics, which tracks mobile data use, the most popular non-voice feature is text messaging, with 61 million users having tried it at least once. An additional 46 million have tried mobile gaming, followed by 33 million who take photos.

At the bottom of the list, 3 million people have used their phone to access a dating service, 1.5 million have accessed their horoscopes and 1.2 million have looked at comics or humor sites on their phone.

People also are learning to use cell phones in a variety of ways not entirely foreseen by cell phone carriers and manufacturers.

According to the BBDO Worldwide study, 44 percent of Americans have found ways to flirt using their cell phones, such as through text messages.

In the Sprint survey, almost two of every three people used their cell phone backlight to look for something in the dark, mostly keyholes and walkways.

But there's another side to the cell phone: bad and rude behavior.

In an ABC News poll released last month, 87 of respondents said the bad behavior they observed the most was people making annoying cell phone calls. The study, however, found that annoying cell phone calls were actually the third-most-bothersome conduct for respondents after overall rude behavior and use of bad language. Survey data show we are still trying to figure out the socially acceptable limits for cell phone use. In a survey about to be released by Let's Talk, a mobile retail and research company, 38 percent of 2,119 people said it was fine to use the cell phone in the bathroom. That is down from 62 percent in 2003 and 39 percent in 2000, when the survey began.

The same survey found that only 2 percent say that using a cell phone in a movie or theater is acceptable, compared with 11 percent in 2000. Cell phone use in restaurants and public transportation also are slipping in approval, down to 21 percent and 45 percent, respectively. Cell phone use in supermarkets, however, is growing more acceptable, with two of every three people deeming it OK.

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