Orality in the Library: How Mobile Phones Challenge Our Understandings of Collaboration in Hybridized Information Spaces

Rhonda McEwen
University of Toronto
Faculty of Information
rhonda.mcewen@utoronto.ca

Kathleen Scheaffer
University of Toronto
Faculty of Information
kathleen.scheaffer@utoronto.ca

ABSTRACT
Following a period of rapid and widespread adoption of mobile phones as personal information artefacts worldwide, academic centres and their staff are currently grappling with the impacts of this paradigm shift and how they effect the management of their spaces. As users participate in these spaces they are confronted with rules, policies or guidelines that are antithetical to their domesticated mobile phone practices. Being ‘always on’ and ‘always with’ their mobile phones symbolically and nominally imply that these devices have become an important component to how users seek, use, share and relate to information.

Yet information centres such as academic libraries have long traditions in offering and enforcing voice and noise-free spaces for information access. Similar to notions of increasing integration of public and private spaces, academic libraries have become reinterpreted and rebranded as collaborative technology laboratories, information commons, and media labs used as both public gathering sites and as places for private and individual study. In this study we explored the extent to which norms and policies within these hybridized information spaces acknowledge and/or make allowances for the use of oral communication both in face-to-face interactions and virtually via mobile phones. We investigated how historical understandings of users’ (quiet) interactions with the information resources in academic libraries impact the way users engage with each other and with technology in these spaces for collaboration.

We conducted a documentary analysis of communication guidelines, policies, and posted signage regarding mobile phone use within an iSchool’s integrated library and information studies laboratory (lab) to gain a contextual understanding of the manner in which user’s communications practices were influenced by the language, messaging, and visual rhetoric embodied in these information sources. In addition, we conducted experiments over a two-week period in 2009 within the lab, involving both staged and observed mobile phone use within the space, and interviewed co-present staff and users to gather their perspectives on mobile phone use in the lab. Comparing the data from the documentary analysis with the experiment results we assessed influence of the official discourse on the structuring and facilitation of communicative interaction, and considered inherent contradictions in intent of the documented guidelines versus the expectation that the lab should be used as a collaborative space.

Early results indicated that the policy-makers within this information centre expressed hesitation in determining whether or not guidelines or policies should exist for mobile phone use in this hybridized information space, and what they should include. This led to a lack of explicit communication on mobile phone use leaving staff and users to interpret what was acceptable etiquette based on their experiences in other similar settings. Some users rapidly exited the space when they received an incoming call and expressed feelings of guilt about receiving a mobile phone call, particularly if the ring-tone was audible. Other users noted that since the space allows for face-to-face conversation among users that it is a space where mobile phone conversations may also take place; therefore, they felt that some use mobile phone use was to be expected. We observed staff using their mobile phones in the execution of their duties, and noted strategies that some users employed to strike what they believed to be an appropriate balance in reconciling feelings that mobile phone conversation was not allowed with their inclination to use the device as one of the information tools at their disposal.

Framing the analysis in science and technology studies we focus on the dynamic context within which these observations are made – a changing set of information practices involving mobile phones, a changing articulation of information centres as collaborative spaces, and the impact of embedded assumptions and expectations of how these spaces should be used based on historical precedents. We demonstrate that collaboration itself is interpreted in different ways when situated in specific types of environments and more so when face-to-face interaction is privileged over virtual collaboration via the mobile phone. We conclude with recommendations for policy-makers and managers of hybridized information spaces about how guidelines can be developed that involve a more in-depth understanding of mobile phone use in information spaces.

1 See for example research report by Kalba, Kas “The Global Adoption and Diffusion of Mobile Phones” [112 pages; December 2008], Information Resources Policy, Harvard University.
Keywords
mobile phones, cell phones, libraries, information centres, iSchool, space, place

REFERENCES

