

An Untouchable Device

A New Medium Becomes Part of the Body

Last November, a nationwide high school principal association reported that, “Cell phone services disturb school life.” Over half of all high schools in Japan have problems with student cell phone usage in class such as “exchanging e-mail while in a class” or “ringing tones disrupting a class”.

The major problem which was identified was the way in which cell phones should be confiscated when they are disturbing a class. According to my friend, a high school teacher, “I tell students I am simply taking care of the cell phone when I take it from a student, and I visibly put it into an envelope then keep it in a locker.” When I asked why he has to be so sensitive he answered, “A cell phone is more and more an important extension of self for a student’s life. If a teacher takes care of it badly, they might provoke students to explosive anger or cause them to be in a panic.”

Last September, in my study room, we performed “a cell phone usage research” to objectify the attitudes of high school students. According to the results of this research, the cell phone online services which students mostly use are the e-mail service, downloading music for ring tones, downloading wall papers and music, watching movies, access to game information and porno pictures, and for playing games, besides using bulletin boards and Deaikei sites. In short, this is just an expensive toy. During the same research, we also asked about the usage of cell phones for study, and the result we found was that it is not an unsuitable media for educational usage.

From these studies, it seems that the cell phone is not really so important as to become a mania for children. In fact, answers to the question of “Is the cell phone a necessary tool for you?” the answers were only 33% for “Yes, indeed,” while the reasons given were that students “feel anxious or afraid to terminate connections with their friends”. These were emotional and not urgent life-supporting reasons. Even the children themselves, who wanted to carry a cell phone, stated during the interviews that “There is no clear reason of necessity for having the cell phone”.

If this is so, then why do they so emotionally and strongly resist confiscation? From several interview studies we found that for many high school students, a cell phone is now “a media which is increasingly becoming a part of their body” and so they do not want their cell phones be touched or even seen by anyone they do not choose, not even by their parents. It has become an extremely private part of their identity. Especially if teachers confiscate the device, students are strongly worried whether “teachers may check sensitive e-mail messages” or “snoop about our history of network usage.”

In consideration of these responses, I cannot help saying that a cell phone for today's teenager has become a mass media of privacy. If it is confiscated and private information is checked, it seems to engender the same emotions as if a threatening stranger had suddenly entered a student's private bedroom and read their secret diary.

In this assessment of an adolescent's mental state, we can see that they do not want their privacy invaded or their sensitive secrets exposed to parents and teachers, who feel they are acting to protect and provide guidance to these children. When we witness students' emotional response to having their cell phones taken away, it becomes clear that theirs is a natural need to protect their private information against invasive scrutiny by overbearing adults.

The problem for concerned adults is that such an Internet connectable private device has the ability to expose children to dangerous information and to predators, thus leading to unusual and pervasive circumstances, which previous generations have never experienced.