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Mobile Junkies Reshaping Society?

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By Joanna Glasner | Also by this reporter
02:00 AM Oct, 09, 2002

Some people watch a group of Tokyo teens trade messages on mobile phones and consider it an ordinary part of 21st century life.

Futurists, however, see even the mundane act of thumb-typing as the kernel of a revolution.

Howard Rheingold, author of *Virtual Reality* and other works in the early 1990s that prophesied the rise of electronic communities, credits such a display of text messaging with supplying the inspiration for his upcoming book *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*.

The book -- to be released this month -- investigates the social impact of mobile and pervasive computing. In eight chapters, Rheingold chronicles how "smart mobs," defined as "people who are able to act in concert even if they don't know each other," are reshaping the way societies organize and interact.

Rheingold's central thesis is that the mobile Internet provides far more than an untethered

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version of the wired workstation. It is, he asserts, creating a quiet revolution.

As Rheingold puts it: "Mobile communications and pervasive computing technologies, together with social contracts that were never possible before, are already beginning to change the way people meet, mate, work, war, buy, sell, govern and create."

The most compelling sections of *Smart Mobs* are not the ones that articulate this thesis. They are the profiles of people Rheingold meets in the process of his research. The cast of characters takes the reader from Tokyo to Helsinki to Silicon Valley, with no shortage of eccentrics.

Listen up:
Interview with Howard Rheingold

Consider Steve Mann, a University of Toronto professor best known for transforming himself into a cyborg. Mann proposes that people will require wearable computing gear as protection from the constant barrage of unsolicited commercial messages.

The bulk of Rheingold's examples of "smart mob" behavior, however, rely on mobile technology. He cites a cult of fare jumpers who ride Stockholm's public transit system and use text messaging to warn each other when a conductor is on the way to check tickets.

Rheingold also makes the case that mobile technology has altered teenage etiquette. After a series of talks with cell-phone-toting Tokyo teenagers, Rheingold concludes that being on time is no longer a matter of concern for the mobile crowd. As long as one is reachable by short message service (SMS) or phone, being late is a non-issue.

In Rheingold's view, the availability of constant mobile communication and information access is a good and bad thing -- but mostly a good thing.

It allows freedom of movement (office workers are less tied to their cubicles, for example) and can help a population organize quickly around a cause. The book notes that both the Seattle World Trade Organization protests of 1999 and the demonstrations that led to the removal of Philippine President Joseph Estrada last year were aided by mobile phones and text messaging.

But Rheingold's mostly sunny picture of the mobile technofuture contains one dark shadow: The same technologies that allow for anytime, anyplace communication may also open the door to a level of surveillance unimaginable to prior generations.

"We are moving rapidly into a world in which the spying machinery is built into every object we encounter," Rheingold writes. "Although we leave traces of our personal lives with our credit cards and Web browsers today, tomorrow's mobile devices will broadcast clouds of personal data to invisible monitors all around us."

Rheingold offers no solution to the conundrum of how much privacy, if any, ought to be sacrificed in the name of instant communications.

Perhaps the most insightful tidbit in Rheingold's book comes from outside the mobile revolution. The source is an unnamed Amish man who explained his anti-tech philosophy to Rheingold in the following way:

"It's not just how we use the technology that concerns us. We're also concerned about what kind of people we become when we use it."

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