

Published as: Shepherd, Tamara and Leslie Regan Shade. (2012). "The Mobile and Me: Canadian Youth Talk About their Mobile Phones," in *Technologies of Mobility in the Americas*, eds. Phillip Vannini, Lucy Budd, Christian Fisker, Paola Jiron and Ole Jensen. New York: Peter Lang.

11

Mobile Phones as a "Necessary Evil": Canadian Youth Talk about Negotiating the Politics of Mobility

Tamara Shepherd and Leslie Regan Shade

In research conducted with young people on their use and perceptions of the mobile phone, the Pew Internet and American Life Project argued that understanding how youth use mobile phones is vital to creating effective policy based on the reality of how the technology is used (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010, p. 10). The ways that young people use their mobiles is in turn often influenced by the policies and pricing schemes of wireless telecommunications companies, which forms the backdrop for this chapter. In order to examine how mobile phones are marketed toward and perceived by young Canadians, we adapt a framework developed by Mackay and Gillespie (1992), who argued that inserting a cultural studies approach into a social shaping of technology (SST) perspective allows for a nuanced examination of three interrelated spheres of technology: regulation, marketing, and appropriation by users. These spheres further relate to Cresswell's (2010) "constellations of mobility" framework, which is attentive to historically contingent iterations of mobility as "movement, meaning and practice and the ways in which these are interrelated" (p. 26). In this chapter, we relate how a small group of young Canadians discuss these constellations of mobility in their everyday lives, particularly in terms of how their appropriation of mobile devices is shaped by regulation and marketing discourses that position them as mobile consumers.

The first sphere, regulation, is examined through an overview of the current contested state of the wireless industry in Canada, wherein debates over levels of foreign ownership in the telecommunications sector revolve around competition, affordability, and cultural sovereignty. Several mobile marketing campaigns by incumbent firms and new upstart companies specifically targeting youth are analyzed to comprise the second sphere. The attitudes and practices surrounding the everyday use and economics of the mobile phone by a selected group of Canadians aged 20–24 comprise the third sphere. When the discussions of young people's everyday interactions with mobile devices and culture are placed in dialogue with their positioning within regulatory and marketing discourses, the constellations of mobility that comprise these spheres are expressly political. As Cresswell contended, constellations of mobility entail specific politics of mobility, based on the regulation and control of movement within broader architectural, social, and governmental structures.

This research is timely given the opening of the wireless spectrum market in Canada, where new entrants are competing with the incumbent carriers amidst marketing campaigns that are particularly targeting young Canadians. While mobile phone adoption has become common—99% of the population subscribes to mobile services—the younger demographic is

1 seen as a key site for emerging trends in wireless communication (CWTA, 2010). By exploring
2 the practices of young people within the broader context of the national wireless industry and its
3 marketing strategies, this chapter aims to highlight how the economics of youths' mobile phone
4 use might impinge on the broader politics of mobility in relation to young people as both
5 consumers and political actors in the context of Canada's current telecommunications regime.
6 As the historical context where certain constellations of mobility take shape, we frame Canadian
7 telecommunications politics as a space where the meanings of mobility are being defined. In
8 examining how young mobile phone users are represented through discourses of regulation,
9 marketing, and user appropriation, we extend the framework of constellations of mobility as a
10 way of interconnecting young people's everyday experiences of this increasingly prevalent
11 technological sphere.

13 **Regulation: Shaping the Mobile Terrain**

14
15 Canada's wireless industry, dominated as it is by three established telecommunications
16 firms—Rogers Communications, Inc.; BCE's Bell Mobility, Inc.; and Telus Communications
17 Company—reflects both the constraints of mobile phone technology and the legislative
18 parameters of the Federal government's telecommunications policies. According to a 2010
19 report, these "big three" players account for 95% of the Canadian market and enjoy the highest
20 profit margins of any wireless corporations in the developed world (Nowak, 2010). Part of this
21 dominance has to do with the physical exigencies of Canada: providing wireless infrastructure to
22 a relatively sparsely distributed population across a vast land area is challenging, and only larger
23 conglomerates are able to exercise country-wide network coverage (Senate Canada, 2010).

24 **Regulatory regime.**

25
26
27 Along with the infrastructural parameters that have contributed to the dominance of the
28 big three corporations, regulatory restrictions on foreign ownership have prevented major, global
29 competitors from entering the market. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications
30 Commission (CRTC), the country's central regulatory body, has established and policed rules on
31 foreign ownership and control of broadcasting and telecommunications services since its
32 formation in 1976. Traditionally, these ownership restrictions applied to companies that were
33 not as profitable as the big three wireless providers. The big three's 2007 revenues of
34 approximately USD\$440 per capita are high when compared against the revenues of other
35 wireless industries in developed countries (e.g., USD\$400 per capita in Korea; USD\$390 per
36 capita in the US; and USD\$280 per capita in Sweden (OECD, 2009, figures 3.5 and 3.8). Public
37 dissatisfaction with the way that Rogers, Bell, and Telus have exploited their market share and
38 charge the third highest prices of all 30 OECD member countries, has led the CRTC to consider
39 strategies for increasing competition between wireless service providers (OECD, 2009; Senate
40 Canada, 2010).

41 In 2008, Industry Canada held an Advanced Wireless Services spectrum auction that
42 reserved the 40 MHz portion of the electromagnetic spectrum—one of a series of wavelengths
43 that carry wireless signals—for licensing to new entrants to the market (Senate Canada, 2010).
44 The auction generated over \$4bn in profit for the federal government and ended with the big
45 three companies retaining and expanding their spectrum licenses, while new entrants (Shaw,

1 Quebecor-Videotron, Bragg, DAVE Wireless, Public Mobile, and Globalive Wireless) were able
2 to bid for a share of the 40 MHz spectrum (Canadian Press, 2008).

3 This resulting shift in the landscape of wireless providers in Canada reflects the federal
4 government's emphasis on wireless communications and the promotion of a "digital economy"
5 (Sawchuk & Crow, 2010). By holding spectrum auctions, the government set up its
6 recommendations for a "national digital strategy" to involve the liberalization of foreign
7 ownership restrictions in telecommunications (Government of Canada, 2010). As Industry
8 Minister, Tony Clement, proposed in his 2010 announcement of consultations on foreign
9 ownership, liberalization will take shape in one of three forms: removing all restrictions;
10 increasing the limit of foreign investment from the current 20 to 49%; or lifting restrictions for
11 carriers with less than 10% of market share (CBC News, 2011). By allowing increased foreign
12 ownership, the government hopes to attract investment in Canada's wireless infrastructure,
13 claiming that consumers will see benefits in service quality and affordability (Senate Canada,
14 2010).

15

Table 1 <i>Wireless Market in Canada, Winter 2011</i>		
Operator	Service Brand	Subscriber Market Share 2009 (CRTC, 2010)
Bell Mobility	Northwestel, NMI Mobility, Virgin Mobile, Solo Mobile	30%
Rogers Wireless	Fido, Chat'r	37%
TELUS Mobility	Koodo Mobile, Mike	28%
Public Mobile		Unknown
Globalive	Wind Mobile	Unknown
Mobilicity (formerly DAVE Wireless)		Unknown
SaskTel Mobility		Unknown
Videotron		Unknown

16
17 These regulatory transitions meant to increase competition in Canada's relatively closed
18 wireless industry show how constellations of mobility—shaped in part by infrastructural
19 parameters determined by government regulation of industry—are contingent both
20 geographically and historically (Cresswell, 2010). Increasing wireless industry competition in
21 Canada has raised tensions between the current Conservative administration that seeks to lift
22 long-standing CRTC foreign ownership restrictions. The story of Globalive's WIND mobile
23 brand offers a salient example of the friction in Canadian regulation of wireless services, with its
24 foreign investment from Egyptian firm, Orascom Telecom Holding SAE, causing a back-and-
25 forth negotiation between the federal government and the CRTC of its status as a "Canadian
26 company" (CRTC, 2009). With the election of a majority Conservative government in May
27 2011, it is anticipated that opening up foreign ownership restrictions will be a priority for the
28 forthcoming legislative agenda. The outcome of this regulatory struggle will in turn affect the
29 constellations of mobility afforded to individual Canadians who use mobile devices.

1 What is particularly interesting for us about stories like Globalive’s in the context of the
2 wireless industry in Canada is that young people form a crucial market where innovative
3 ownership, control, and pricing structures battle for consumers. For example, Rogers’s takeover
4 of Microcell’s lower-priced Fido in 2004 served to reinstate the company’s dominant market
5 share by bringing in the lucrative 12- to 19-year-old demographic (Ross, 2004). Now a
6 subsidiary of Rogers, Fido—like Telus’s Koodo and Bell’s Virgin Mobile and Solo—operates
7 through Rogers to attract younger consumers with discounted pricing plans, including student
8 deals. Newer entrants to the market, including Globalive’s WIND, Public Mobile, and DAVE
9 Wireless’s Mobilicity, have been reticent to position themselves as direct competitors to the
10 incumbents’ “flanker” brands, but have explicitly framed themselves as “value” providers for
11 lower-income consumers, such as young people. Mobilicity, for example, has purchased
12 spectrum licenses only for urban centres, seeking to attract those who “live, work and play” in
13 Canada’s most populous and primarily youthful cities. In response, Rogers launched the Chat’r
14 brand in 2010 as a direct competitor to newer entrants for the low-income and youth
15 demographic.

16 Attracting young people to enhanced features and content for their mobiles is a lucrative
17 enterprise for service providers. Consumers spent an estimated \$176 million in 2008 on mobile
18 content and applications, including \$43 million for personalized content (i.e., ringtones,
19 wallpaper, logos, skins, and screensavers), \$39 million on games, \$23 million on music, \$17
20 million on TV, and an additional \$30 million on miscellaneous content (Ovum Consulting,
21 2010). Consumer revenues from such features is now even higher given the popularity of Apple
22 and Android smartphones, the development of new applications, and the seamless integration of
23 social networking sites such as Facebook into these devices.

24 The youth market share has thus been a crucial site where recent changes to Canada’s
25 wireless industry have played out for consumers. Through their marketing campaigns directed
26 toward young mobile phone users, wireless service providers articulate the central
27 preoccupations of the industry, both in terms of consumers’ negotiation of the marketplace and
28 regulators’ shaping of industry competition.

30 **Marketing: The Positioning of Young People in Mobile Phone Advertisements**

31
32 Within the increasingly competitive milieu of mobile phone providers in Canada, young
33 people have been identified as a target market demographic, consistent with the Pew study’s
34 central finding that “the mobile phone has become the favored communication hub for the
35 majority of American teens” (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 2). In reiterating this popular narrative
36 about young people and mobility, advertisements directly addressing young people pervade the
37 marketing strategies of mobile carriers in Canada, particularly those of lower-cost subsidiary
38 providers and new entrants to the market. Companies providing budget and student pricing plans
39 promote them with appeals to stereotypical interests and concerns of young people. A survey of
40 the television advertising campaigns of Rogers, Bell, Telus, Fido, Koodo, Virgin Mobile, Wind
41 Mobile, Public Mobile, Mobilicity, and Chat’r shows that these brands position young
42 consumers by highlighting either service quality, handset features or pricing deals. While each
43 ad typically emphasizes one of these qualities over the others, the promotion of pricing plans
44 seems to be a consistent feature of all of the ads that target youth. The following discussion of
45 the trope of pricing promotions in wireless provider ads aims to highlight how overarching
46 market structures translate into the cultural form of advertising, which in turn has contributed to

1 our university student participants' perceptions of mobile phone service in Canada, described in
2 terms of constellations of mobility.

3 The television advertising produced by Canada's big three tends to focus on the quality of
4 service consumers might enjoy on their extensive wireless networks. Rogers's most notorious
5 TV ad campaign, for example, involves a 30-something office worker who never seems to get
6 decent reception on his non-Rogers cell phone in situations where his rival colleague—on
7 Rogers's "Canada's fastest high-speed network"—always (vexingly) appears to enjoy perfect
8 call quality. In another set of Rogers ads that more explicitly targets the youth market, pricing
9 plans like the My5 buddy list (a feature that allows users to create their "calling circle," allowing
10 for unlimited voice, text, or video messages, depending on which package they choose) are
11 emphasized in addition to call quality.

12 Typically, network coverage and quality are not features that tend to be highlighted in ads
13 directed toward young people. Rather, coverage and reliability are promoted to a more general
14 audience, as in Telus's series of ads featuring hippopotami to promote "Canada's largest 3G+
15 network." Bell's ads work in a similar way, marketing Canada's "best network" through a series
16 of ads that feature actors representing a broad age range. The parallel claims for the speed, size,
17 and reliability of their networks mark the ad campaigns of the big three, and significantly, these
18 ads are not obviously targeted to young mobile phone users. In this way, young people are
19 positioned as not too concerned with the quality of service, and are instead more interested in
20 having cool, new devices on the lowest pricing plans.

21 Ads that demonstrate the features of mobile devices, particularly those of smartphones,
22 figure in the youth-oriented campaigns of Rogers and in the more general series of cute animal
23 ads from Telus. For example, Rogers shows smartphones in situations that are meant to speak
24 directly to young people's social experiences. In its newest ad to this effect, Rogers promotes its
25 Data Share plan by showing how a young woman travelling on a coach bus can pass the time
26 with both her smartphone and tablet, which share the same data plan. The ad attempts to show
27 how these expensive devices have been woven into the fabric of young people's everyday lives,
28 recalling earlier Rogers ads that positioned MP3 phones within young people's experiences in
29 music-based subcultures. This earlier trend seems to have been transposed onto smartphones'
30 capacity to not only play music but HD video, in addition to a host of Internet-enabled features
31 and applications. Rogers ads depict these phones as integrated into young peoples' lives, but
32 they do not necessarily promote affordable pricing.

33 In other brands' campaigns directed toward young people, smartphones also tend to
34 dominate; but unlike the Rogers ads, other brands attempt to show how these devices might
35 actually be affordable for lower-income consumers. The principal trend among youth-directed
36 ads is to promote special pricing deals and plans, while not compromising on phone features.
37 Discount subsidiaries Fido, Koodo, and Virgin Mobile all hinge their advertising on this kind of
38 pricing. Virgin Mobile's sexy ad campaign targets young consumers through attractive actors
39 and blaring dance music, while promoting deals like "3 months unlimited Web on-the-go" or a
40 "\$50 activation bonus." Similarly, but trading on humour rather than sex appeal, Koodo's
41 current "El Tabador" ads feature an animated *lucha libre* (Mexican "free wrestling") figurine,
42 saving young people money and aggravation through "\$0 phones with no fixed-term contracts,"
43 along with extras like "social networking for \$10 a month." These ads show how young people
44 might be able to afford smartphone features by promoting bonuses and discounted pricing, and in
45 the case of Fido, also by replacing their home phones. In the Fido ad, "Stairs," for example, a
46 college-age "dude" sits in his messy room recounting a tale of falling down the stairs due to the

1 inconvenience of his home phone. The moral of his tale is to replace the home phone with a
2 smartphone, in this case the BlackBerry Pearl, on one of Fido's talk and text plans "from \$15 per
3 month, with no system access fees." This ad conveys the importance of having a smartphone for
4 young people, which is shown to be feasible only if they take advantage of special pricing deals
5 while eliminating other expenses, such as a landline.

6 Yet while smartphones are presented here as necessities for young people who not only
7 talk and text, but use social networking sites such as Facebook on an everyday basis, the newer
8 entrants to Canada's wireless service market base their advertising on a no-frills approach to
9 mobile communication. Eschewing trendy smartphones, WIND Mobile and Public Mobile
10 promote low-pricing plans for talk and text services only, featuring actors across a diverse age
11 range who are shown to prefer basic handsets that don't require data plans or Internet
12 connectivity. For example, Public Mobile's pricing plans cover "unlimited" talk and text
13 services for a fixed monthly rate ranging from \$24 to \$40. The use of the key word "unlimited"
14 aims to highlight the restrictions incumbent providers often impose. These new entrants attempt
15 to make the pricing structure clearer for budget-conscious, low-income, and young consumer
16 groups. Trading on Canadian consumers' frustration with hidden fees, time limits, and rate
17 restrictions, these advertisements aim to provide greater transparency in wireless service
18 marketing.

19 Overall, the television advertisements show broad patterns in the way that mobile phones
20 and wireless services are marketed to young Canadians. The big three companies tend to market
21 their services in terms of network speed, size, and quality, while their discount subsidiaries more
22 explicitly target young people with the latest smartphones at low rates. The new entrants to the
23 market couple their claims for low rates with unlimited service, working to provide pricing
24 transparency rather than trendy features like social networking or infrastructural dominance in
25 service area and quality. As an early response to the campaigns of these new entrants, Rogers's
26 Chat'r discount brand directly references the poor service quality of brands like WIND, Public,
27 and Mobilicity. But again, this service-quality campaign features office workers, indicating that
28 young people are not the target market when it comes to the functioning of the network. Rather,
29 the most prevalent trope in advertisements for younger consumers has to do with unlimited
30 service at low prices.

31 **Pricing and transparency.**

32
33
34 The deals featured in mobile phone marketing campaigns directed toward young
35 Canadians offer an insight into how pricing schemes function within the promotional economy
36 of advertising. In all cases (even those that attempt to be transparent), advertisements that
37 revolve around competitive pricing conceal, to varying degrees, the actual terms and conditions
38 of service. While a lack of transparency in pricing promotions is endemic to much commercial
39 advertising, it reveals some distinctive contours of the mobile phone industry in Canada.

40 As one of the most profitable Canadian industries, wireless services comprise the largest
41 component of total telecommunications revenues (41%) and generated \$16.9 billion in 2009
42 (CWTA, 2010). This high profit margin may be correlated with the OECD's finding that Canada
43 ranks among OECD countries with the highest priced wireless service (OECD, 2009). High
44 prices for wireless services contrast with the relatively affordable wireless prices in other
45 developed nations, as well as the globally low prices for landline communications in Canada.
46 With wireless prices in Canada thus standing out as being high, consumers have been

1 increasingly vocal about the perceived lack of fair pricing. In a national series that ran in March
2 2010, the CBC's Marketplace investigated the story of "Canada's worst cell phone bill," an
3 indication of rising public anger directed toward the dubious pricing practices of the big three
4 providers (Sawchuk & Crow, 2010). As the Marketplace story concluded, cellphone service
5 actually costs carriers very little, compared to the "astronomical and sometimes mystifying
6 charges" faced by consumers.

7 In this context of widespread public anger and mistrust, newer entrants to Canada's
8 mobile phone industry have used the high costs and hidden fees of the big three and their
9 subsidiaries as selling points. In its inaugural "Hot Dog Fees" advertisement, for example,
10 WIND mobile focused on this very issue, using humour to highlight the absurdity of mobile
11 providers' hidden, added fees through the analogy of a hot dog vendor demanding extra fees for
12 preparation, buns, napkins, and condiments. Newer providers like WIND and Public Mobile
13 have explicitly made their contracts more transparent and therefore trustworthy. This move,
14 intended to appeal to Canadians frustrated with the high-priced, binding contracts of the big
15 three, also represents a response to the practice of discount brands like Virgin Mobile and Koodo
16 to target younger consumers with "tabs" rather than contracts. The tab system allows consumers
17 to acquire a handset for little or no initial cost, while adding a small portion of that cost to the
18 monthly bill without a fixed-term contract. So while tabs enable consumers to avoid
19 commitment to a high-priced contract, their bills still feature hidden fees as part of the tab
20 system. Other companies seek to attract consumers with credit incentives, such as the "Fido
21 Dollars." Yet tabs and credits can be seen as further complicating the pricing structure of these
22 service providers, who perform a kind of benevolence to consumers in order to obscure unfair
23 fees.

24 Thus despite the diverse attempts of mobile carriers to trade on trust in their promotional
25 materials, an atmosphere of cynicism seems to pervade the public attitude toward Canadian
26 wireless companies. Globally high prices for wireless services not regulated by the CRTC
27 appear to endure given the uncertain situation of market newcomers. As the only recourse for
28 consumer protection in the mobile phone sector, the independent, not-for-profit Commissioner
29 for Complaints for Telecommunications Services (CCTS) claimed that the price charged by a
30 service provider "is a business decision that it alone is entitled to make. Marketplace
31 competition means that you may find a better deal with another provider" (CCTS, 2011, n.p.).
32 Yet while marketplace competition has so far not resulted in fair and/or lower prices for
33 Canadians, consumers—including youth—have become wary of the promises of mobile phone
34 marketing.

35 36 **Appropriation: Young Canadians Talk About Mobile Phones**

37
38 The lack of transparency in Canadian mobile phone advertising, as an extension of the
39 consolidation of the industry in this country, has engendered a deep-seated mistrust of mobile
40 service providers by many young Canadians. For this pilot study, we conducted informal focus
41 groups with students aged 20–24 in Concordia University's undergraduate program in
42 Communication Studies.¹ These in-depth discussions provided a detailed account of the
43 constellations of mobility which are apparent in student attitudes toward mobile phones. Based
44 on a series of open-ended questions, participants were encouraged to discuss their relationships
45 to mobiles in terms of the features of their handsets, their use of the phones, social conventions,
46 advertising, pricing plans, and dealings with service providers. Their reflections acknowledged

1 the embeddedness of mobile phones within an everyday communicative ecology, but were
2 accompanied by skepticism about the advertising, pricing schemes, and customer service of
3 mobile providers. Quotations from selected focus group participants are used in the discussion
4 below to illustrate the way that young Canadians negotiate the mobile phone landscape in
5 Canada.
6
7

8 **The indispensable mobile phone: Uses and conventions.** 9

10 Our participants use their mobile phones multiple times throughout the day and, despite
11 the sometimes aggravating expectation to be “always on,” mobile devices are seen as being
12 virtually indispensable. This attitude is consistent with recent figures from the Canadian
13 Wireless Telecommunications Association (CWTA) and the Harris-Decima *2008 Wireless*
14 *Attitudes Study* which respectively reported that over 99% of the country’s population is served
15 by wireless coverage and that cell phone penetration is highest among the 18–34 age group
16 (CWTA, 2010; Harris-Decima, 2008). In keeping with these statistics, our participants opined
17 that it was highly unusual to know someone without a mobile phone. As Michelle claimed, such
18 young people are viewed suspiciously: “you feel the anxiety socializing with people that don’t
19 have it, because it’s just a totally different set of habits and standards to what you’re used to.”
20 The habits and standards that go along with mobile phone usage for young people came up
21 repeatedly in our discussions with participants, indicating how mobiles have become embedded
22 into everyday social practices.

23 The embeddedness of mobiles into youth’s everyday lives has been studied across a
24 variety of youth cultures, which seem to share some similar features. For instance, Ishii (2006)
25 described how Japanese youth use mobiles more than any other communications technology,
26 facilitated largely by the unique provision of “advanced services” by that country’s wireless
27 service providers (p. 349). In Sweden, as Thulin and Vilhelmson (2009) discussed, teenagers
28 similarly show a dependence on relatively affordable mobile communication, preferring to use
29 text messaging over computer-based instant messaging as part of enacting “always on”
30 connectedness. These two studies represent only a portion of the extensive literature on how
31 youth in Nordic and East Asian countries in particular, where wireless services are relatively
32 affordable for young people, use mobile phones to both reinforce existing social practices and
33 enact new kinds of communication (see Ito, 2005; Johnsen, 2003; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Kim,
34 2005). The various ways that young people use mobiles worldwide are thus somewhat
35 contingent on the market dynamics within particular countries, even though on average, youth all
36 over the world has been seen as a key constituency of mobile consumers as part of their coming
37 of age and negotiation of identity within mediated social contexts.

38 Beyond being useful for coordinating meetings, making calls, or feeling safe (the typical
39 practices that are adopted early on by American teens, e.g., Blair & Fletcher, 2011), mobiles
40 perform a variety of functions that the young people in our study said they would have difficulty
41 living without. These functions range from the simple act of changing ringtones or alarm music
42 (as Lubomir did with his Sony Ericsson handset), to maintaining long-distance social ties
43 through BlackBerry’s BBM messaging system (as Lara does), to using a translation application
44 on the iPhone to understand concepts presented in class (an example offered by Véronique).
45 Particularly for those with smartphones, the participants were able to list a variety of features and
46 applications that they use on a regular basis, and that they would miss if something happened to

1 their mobiles. As Véronique recalled, finding her way to a recent meeting without the GPS on
2 her iPhone was stressful and unnerving.

3 The anxiety of being without the phone was something that participants agreed upon; but
4 at the same time, they also expressed more critical attitudes to the phone as a kind of “leash.”
5 Michelle described mobiles as a “social norm of protection” for people who feel the need to be
6 occupied at all times and protected from interacting with strangers: “People are so awkward with
7 themselves if they are just left to their own devices in public.” Moreover, as all the participants
8 noted, the expectation to be always available was another way that mobile phones served as
9 leashes. To combat this expectation, Lubomir would deliberately leave his phone at home when
10 going out cycling, and Lara would not take her phone on hikes. Michelle would leave her phone
11 on the vibrate function throughout the day, and then return missed calls at her convenience. As
12 Véronique asserted, “you’re not obliged to always be available.” Lara too agreed with these
13 sentiments, claiming to want to rebel against the always-on expectation, but she also professed
14 her “addiction” to the phone: “I really envy people who can not be on their phone . . . , but I need
15 to take it when I go to school, because I need to do something on that shuttle bus.” Even during
16 the focus group meeting, Lara communicated with friends over BBM, while telling the story of
17 feeling a “phantom phone vibration” after having lost her previous iPhone. The juxtaposition of
18 these two themes—of the phone’s indispensability and the simultaneous pressure of being
19 always available—revealed the group’s conflicting feelings about mobiles.

20 Perhaps most indicative of the way that the participants work to negotiate the habits and
21 standards of mobile phone use, a large portion of the focus group time was spent on discussing
22 social norms around texting. According to the Harris-Decima study, the frequency of text
23 messaging nearly doubled between 2006 and 2008, with the highest percentage of texters aged
24 between 13 and 34 (Harris-Decima, 2008). Yet in that study, talking was still reported to be the
25 “most important” function of the cell phone for all age groups (p. 15). Reflecting the trends
26 found in more recent research, our focus groups revealed that “cell-phone texting has become the
27 preferred channel of basic communication” for youth (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 2). Texting was
28 the most common means of mobile communication among young people and was, paradoxically,
29 viewed as being both less and more intrusive than calling. So while texting was seen as the
30 easiest way to set up meetings or have more private conversations in public spaces, it was also
31 framed as disruptive and rude. As Michelle advised, even though texting has become such an
32 entrenched practice, “when someone’s talking, at least say ‘excuse me.’” Discussions like this
33 one around text etiquette led many of the participants to claim that calling was more to-the-point
34 and therefore less intrusive, but at the same time, they acknowledged that texting might be more
35 appropriate than talking in places like public transit or at the hair salon. The social norms around
36 texting proved to be an important theme for participants to express in terms of the double
37 standards (as Lara confirmed, it’s annoying when other people are texting on their phones all the
38 time, but it’s difficult to not do that yourself) and contradictory attitudes towards cell phone use.

39 40 **Service providers: From bad to worse?**

41
42 Another aspect of the conflicting attitudes that came up during our discussions of texting
43 involved the pricing plans of wireless carriers. The fact that texting was often more affordable
44 than calling also contributed to its widespread use among the participants and their friends.
45 Given the lack of substantial competition and globally high prices among the country’s wireless
46 industry players, our group of young Canadians had reason to be concerned with mobile phone

1 pricing. A 2010 Harvard University report on international rates of broadband access concluded,
2 for example, that Canada was a weak performer in terms of Internet speed, prices, and 3G mobile
3 penetration (Benkler et al., 2010). Unlike the prevalence of prepaid calling plans offered in
4 many European and Asian countries, or the “low nationwide flat-rate pricing structure for mobile
5 telephony” in the US—both of which allow youth to make calls affordably (Ling, 2007, p. 62)—
6 talk time in Canada tends to be expensive through the overly complicated and often deceptive
7 pricing structures of Canadian wireless providers. As the shape of the industry changes,
8 however, this gap may narrow with new entrants offering more affordable prepaid phone plans.

9 In the meantime, the overall feelings that our participants expressed about wireless
10 providers were mostly negative, as they shared stories of poor customer service and convoluted
11 contractual terms. In fact, as Lubomir contended, bad news stories about wireless carriers come
12 up on a regular basis among his peers, where “people only talk about it if they’re complaining;
13 there’s nothing good to say about it.”

14 In terms of customer service, the group agreed that calling companies to complain, to the
15 point of threatening to switch carriers, was the only way to receive better service. For some of
16 the participants, these dealings with service providers were still taken care of by their parents; for
17 instance, Lara noted that her mom deals with billing and service complaints to Telus about their
18 family plan. Lara described how her mom handled the rest of the family’s service issues by
19 leveraging the whole family’s participation in the plan. Similarly, Michelle discussed her former
20 family plan subscription to Bell Mobility, from which she withdrew because the billing was so
21 convoluted and because in general, “everyone hates Bell.” Now Michelle has a mobile phone
22 from Virgin, and despite initially seeming “more accessible and easy,” her experiences with
23 customer service have been frustrating: “every representative had something different to say.”
24 Regardless of the carrier, it appeared that the participants almost expected that customer service
25 would be a hassle. As Lubomir said, although neither he nor his family have had major issues
26 with Fido, his girlfriend had been swindled into paying for repairs to her Telus handset that she
27 did not need to operate the phone: “basically they screwed her.”

28 The sense that mobile providers are quick to “screw” customers was shared by the group,
29 who felt that compared to carriers in other countries, Canadian wireless companies were
30 untrustworthy. Lara described how Australian cell phone plans were much less “convoluted,”
31 and Véronique noted that she could easily top up her pay-as-you-go phone in Paris for five euros
32 at a time. Michelle recounted her boyfriend’s experience of converting from a German phone,
33 which the Fido representative claimed was as simple as purchasing a plan and new SIM card on
34 their network. Yet after he had paid for the SIM card and signed the new contract, the company
35 informed him that there was a “problem with the connection,” meaning he would need to
36 purchase a new Fido handset all together: “It’s like, is that manipulation? Like, ‘oh you have to
37 buy our phone.’ Or is that actual?” Michelle’s doubt about the veracity of the company’s claim
38 led her and Véronique to frame the dubious practices of wireless providers in terms of their
39 status as “platforms”; consumers prefer to spend their money in one place through bundled
40 services with single providers, but these providers are conglomerates that own several
41 subsidiaries—subsidiaries with different names, obscuring the structure of corporate ownership
42 for consumers. As Lubomir and Lara concurred, the wireless industry is “basically a monopoly”
43 in Canada.

44 **Lack of transparency in mobile advertising.**

45
46

1 Armed with this sense that Canada's wireless providers are essentially untrustworthy, the
2 participants approached the advertising campaigns with a fair amount of skepticism. Particularly
3 concerning the ads' promotion of pricing plans, the group confidently asserted that they knew the
4 figures quoted were always a gross underestimation. Lubomir even offered the formula that one
5 should expect the cost to be 50% higher than the figure cited in the commercials. The
6 participants seemed to share the attitude that the cost of phones was inevitably greater than the
7 price quoted in the ads, though they did not claim to pay much attention to the ads themselves.
8 As Véronique said, "When I buy a new phone, I'm not thinking, 'oh these ads look nice, what do
9 they have to offer?' I'm just going to figure out how much it costs. For the iPhone, I saw a
10 student plan for example." Yet despite claiming that the ads were not influential on their choices
11 of mobile service providers, the group did agree that pricing plans featured in the ads were
12 misleading and overly complicated.

13 Michelle's experience with Virgin Mobile was exemplary of the way that the advertising
14 and pricing plans target younger consumers in particular, while ultimately misleading them into
15 expensive services. Its seemingly uncomplicated pricing plans drew Michelle to the company,
16 although she was unimpressed with its racy ad campaign, including a billboard of a young
17 woman lying on a couch with the double entendre tagline "c'est meilleur avec Virgin" ("it's
18 better with Virgin") that looms over Concordia's downtown campus. Regardless of the sexiness
19 and, as Michelle put it, "MTV generation" ethos of Virgin's ads, they offered a \$30 per month
20 unlimited texting plan that fit her need for a no-frills handset with basic functionality. Yet even
21 though she signed up for this lower-cost plan with a basic handset, Michelle's bill tended to be
22 consistently higher than advertised: "I feel like whatever plan I get, I'm always going over, and
23 it's always like 70 or 80 dollars, and I just get so pissed with it. It's so stupid, it's such a little
24 piece of crap." Her frustration at Virgin's misleading pricing scheme was matched by an equally
25 exasperated attitude about the company's customer service, which simultaneously panders to
26 youth through its casual tone while never satisfactorily explaining the extra charges accrued with
27 each bill. Her experience with Virgin has led Michelle to be eager to switch providers once her
28 contract expires in another year.

29 The other participants reported similar feelings of frustration in how advertised pricing
30 plans seemed deliberately misleading, or at least, as Michelle surmised, "constantly changing; I
31 feel like we never really know what's actually happening." Véronique's Rogers plan for the
32 iPhone, for instance, was offered through the Concordia University website as a special student
33 deal. While the context of the University's website lent credibility to the offer, its initial three
34 months of unlimited usage ended up feeling manipulative to her: "you get used to being
35 everyday on the Internet, and then you get your habits, and then, Surprise! Month number four,
36 like, oh my god. I have to stop doing that." Moreover, such abrupt changes to service costs are
37 almost never clarified by a call to customer service; in Véronique's case, she was told by Rogers
38 representatives that her bill was not "in the system," and so could not be explained; and, once it
39 was in the system, they justified the charges by saying, "oh don't worry, everybody has that."
40 Lara also reported feeling manipulated by hidden charges through Telus's misleading description
41 of its My5 feature. She had successfully entered her five friends' phone numbers online, and
42 only after incurring significant charges while using the supposedly free program, was informed
43 that the My5 feature didn't cover numbers outside of Canada: "That screwed me over. It's like,
44 'just do it online,' and so I just did it. They cheated me."

45 Lara's sense of feeling cheated provided an apt description of the participants' attitudes
46 toward mobile phone advertising. While the ads claim to offer affordable pricing plans and

1 special deals for younger customers, the young people in this group were well aware of the fact
2 that, as Lubomir said, “the ads are completely not in synch with what it is on paper.” Especially
3 after the participants had seen what mobile phone service was like in other places, including the
4 US, Australia, and European countries, they felt that despite their promotional strategies for low
5 pricing, Canadian wireless companies were price gouging consumers. Because of this perceived
6 unfair pricing, Lubomir mentioned that he hasn’t purchased \$10-per-month call display as part of
7 his plan: “It’s not worth \$10. It is important, but I mean that’s a little ridiculous. Just because
8 they know that everyone wants it, I feel like they’re jacking the price up.” Lara agreed, saying
9 that Canadian wireless carriers charge unfair prices “because they can,” obscuring these charges
10 in assorted hidden fees. The incongruity between the plans advertised in mobile providers’
11 advertisements and the cost of the actual monthly bill resulted in participants’ feeling
12 exasperated with the way that wireless service in Canada is, as Lara characterized it, “just not
13 straightforward at all.”

14 15 **Consensus: Mistrust.**

16
17 The participants’ general mistrust of mobile phone providers, articulated throughout the
18 focus groups, led them to develop various ways of negotiating the Canadian wireless landscape.
19 When initially choosing a provider, for example, participants claimed that because the
20 advertising was perceived as misleading, they tended to seek word-of-mouth advice. “People do
21 that first,” Michelle noted, “because they don’t trust them [wireless companies]. I don’t think
22 anyone does. Everyone’s really cynical about it I think, but you have to do it.” To this,
23 Véronique chimed in, “It’s true, no one trusts them!” So Michelle went with a friend’s advice to
24 try Virgin Mobile, and Véronique signed up with Rogers through the Concordia University
25 student plan. These decisions were seen as temporary, however, as the young people agreed that
26 switching providers was a commonplace practice; they reported anticipating the end of their
27 current contracts to be able to try out another company.

28 As such, even once they had decided to deal with a particular provider, the feeling of
29 mistrust remained. As Lara and Lubomir had discussed, price gouging seemed to be an
30 inevitable practice of Canadian wireless carriers. And so the participants had each cultivated
31 usage strategies to cope with the high costs of mobile service. Balking at the \$10-per-month
32 charge for call display with Fido, Lubomir declined to purchase the service, choosing instead to
33 simply pick up the phone to find out who is calling: “If someone is calling, I *must* pick up.”
34 Similarly, since she has a BlackBerry, Lara detailed how she prefers to use the free BBM
35 messaging system over regular texting, noting how she communicates more often with her
36 contacts who are also on the BlackBerry system since it incurs no extra charge. Michelle’s
37 strategy for keeping her costs low, although not always effective, was to have an older handset
38 with fewer features. These everyday ways of negotiating high costs for cell phone service offer
39 an example of how constellations of mobility—comprised of movement, representation, and
40 practice—get shaped by the institutional regulation of mobility (Cresswell, 2010, p. 27). This
41 group of young people’s cynical attitudes toward Canadian wireless service providers’
42 advertising and pricing schemes contribute to their negotiated appropriation of mobile
43 communication.

44 45 **Conclusion: Young Canadians and the Politics of Mobility**

46

1 As discussed by the participants, mobile device appropriation happens within
2 interconnected constellations of mobility that incorporate complex meanings and politics of
3 contingent “formations of movements, narratives about mobility and mobile practices”
4 (Cresswell, 2010, p. 17). In applying the constellations’ paradigm to young people’s
5 relationships with mobile technologies, the meanings of mobility take shape within the
6 interrelated spheres of regulation, marketing, and appropriation by users (Mackay & Gillespie,
7 1992). Given the current landscape of Canadian wireless service providers, the big three
8 incumbent carriers and their subsidiary brands were viewed by the young people in our study
9 with a significant degree of cynicism. As a kind of “necessary evil,” our participants claimed
10 that wireless carriers engage in deliberate price gouging, with their promotional materials
11 obscuring hidden fees to the point where, as Véronique said, “I always feel that there is
12 something under that is manipulating.” The newer entrants to Canada’s wireless marketplace
13 since the main spectrum auction in 2008 have played on these public feelings of mistrust in their
14 advertising campaigns. Yet regulatory hurdles, along with a lack of word-of-mouth support (as
15 noted by our participants), have made the new entrants’ task to break into the Canadian wireless
16 market not without its challenges—constituting a tenuous terrain in which to negotiate the
17 politics of mobility.

18 For young Canadians reliant on wireless service, the lack of competition in the industry
19 has served to circumscribe their means of appropriating mobile technology, alongside inviting a
20 cynical attitude toward the depictions of youth in the misleading advertising campaigns of
21 service providers. This climate forms an uncertain backdrop for the way that younger users of
22 mobile phones constitute an increasingly crucial demographic in terms of marketing, since they
23 represent a particularly active group of mobile users. The young Canadians we spoke with
24 conveyed an enthusiasm about mobile communication, often seeing their devices as extensions
25 of themselves despite the drawbacks of perpetual availability. In seeing their mobile phones as
26 inevitable technologies of everyday life, they confirmed the broader trend for young people to
27 eschew landline communication (Lenhart et al., 2010, p. 45). In their move away from the
28 established landline infrastructure in Canada, this group of young people has transposed the
29 expectation of an affordable communications infrastructure onto wireless service, and this is the
30 locus for their frustrations about the opaque and unfair pricing plans offered to mobile users.

31 32 33 **Acknowledgements**

34
35 This research was conducted with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities
36 Research Council of Canada, as part of the “Young Canadians, Participatory Digital Culture and
37 Policy Literacy” project.

38 39 40 **Notes**

41
42 1. Students were recruited through a group email sent to former members of a Fall 2010
43 course in the Communication Studies department. Sessions were audio recorded and transcribed
44 into word processing software. Participants consented to their first names being cited.

45

References

- 1
2
- 3 Benkler, Y., Faris, R., Gasser, U., Miyakawa, L., Schultze, S., Baudry, J., & Wilks, A. (2010).
4 *Next generation connectivity: A review of broadband Internet transitions and policy from*
5 *around the world*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard
6 University. Retrieved from <http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/pubrelease/broadband/>
- 7 Blair, B. L., & Fletcher, A. C. (2011). 'The only 13-year-old on Planet Earth without a cell
8 phone': Meanings of cell phones in early adolescents' everyday lives. *Journal of*
9 *Adolescent Research*, 26(2), 155–177.
- 10 The Canadian Press. (2008, June 24). Bidding in Canada's wireless spectrum auction hits \$4B.
11 Retrieved from [http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2008/06/24/spectrum-four-](http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2008/06/24/spectrum-four-billion.html)
12 [billion.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2008/06/24/spectrum-four-billion.html)
- 13 CBC News. (2011, February 15). Globalive ruling to be appealed by Ottawa. Retrieved from
14 <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/story/2011/02/15/clement-globalive-appeal.html>
- 15 CCTS (Commissioner for Complaints for Telecommunications Services). (2011). FAQs.
16 Retrieved from <http://www.ccts-cprst.ca/faqs>
- 17 Cresswell, T. (2010). Towards a politics of mobility. *Environment and Planning D: Society and*
18 *Space*, 28(1), 17–31.
- 19 CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission). (2009, October 29).
20 *Telecom decision CRTC 2009-678*. Retrieved from
21 <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2009/2009-678.htm>
- 22 CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission). (2010). *CRTC*
23 *Communications monitoring report 2010*. Retrieved from
24 <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/policymonitoring/2010/cmr.htm>
- 25 CWTA (Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association). (2010). *Subscriber stats for*
26 *September*. Retrieved from
27 [http://www.cwta.ca/CWTASite/english/facts_figures_downloads/SubscribersStats_en_20](http://www.cwta.ca/CWTASite/english/facts_figures_downloads/SubscribersStats_en_2010_Q3.pdf)
28 [10_Q3.pdf](http://www.cwta.ca/CWTASite/english/facts_figures_downloads/SubscribersStats_en_2010_Q3.pdf)
- 29 Government of Canada. (2010, March 3). *Speech from the throne: A stronger Canada. A*
30 *stronger economy. Now and for the future*. Retrieved from
31 <http://www.speech.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1390>
- 32 Harris-Decima. (2008, September 12). *2008 wireless attitudes study*. Retrieved from
33 http://www.cwta.ca/CWTASite/english/pdf/DecimaStudy_2008.pdf
- 34 Ishii, K. (2006). Implications of mobility: The uses of personal communication media in
35 everyday life. *Journal of Communication*, 56(2), 346–365.
- 36 Ito, M. (2005). Mobile phones, Japanese youth, and the re-placement of social contact. In R.
37 Ling, & P. Pedersen (Eds.), *Mobile communications: Re-negotiation of the social sphere*
38 (pp. 131–148). London, UK: Springer.
- 39 Johnsen, T. E. (2003). The social context of the mobile phone use of Norwegian teens. In J. E.
40 Katz (Ed.), *Machines that become us: The social context of personal communication*
41 *technology* (pp. 161–170). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- 42 Katz, J. E., & Aakhus, M. (Eds.). (2002). *Perpetual contact: Mobile communication, private talk,*
43 *public performance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- 44 Kim, J. (2005). An examination and comparison of mobile phone uses by adolescents and adults.
45 *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies*, 49(3), 262–286.

- 1 Lenhart, A., Ling, R., Campbell, S., & Purcell, K. (2010, April 20). *Teens and mobile phones*.
2 Pew Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved from
3 <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Teens-and-Mobile-Phones.aspx>
- 4 Ling, R. (2007). Children, youth, and mobile communication. *Journal of Children and Media*,
5 *1*(1), 60–67.
- 6 Mackay, H., & Gillespie, G. (1992). Extending the social shaping of technology approach:
7 Ideology and appropriation. *Social Studies of Science*, *22*(4), 685–716.
- 8 Nowak, P. (2010, July 19). Canadian wireless firms still tops in profit: Report. *CBC News*.
9 Retrieved from [http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2010/07/19/canada-wireless-](http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2010/07/19/canada-wireless-profit.html)
10 [profit.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/story/2010/07/19/canada-wireless-profit.html)
- 11 OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). (2009). *OECD*
12 *communications outlook 2009*. Retrieved from
13 http://www.oecd.org/document/39/0,3746,en_2649_34225_48223143_1_1_1_1,00.html
- 14 Ovum Consulting Group. (2010). *The benefit of the wireless telecommunications industry to the*
15 *Canadian economy*. Retrieved from
16 www.cwta.ca/CWTASite/english/pdf/OVUM_Study.pdf
- 17 Ross, R. (2004, September 21). Rogers fetches Fido for \$1.4 billion. *Toronto Star*, p. D01.
- 18 Sawchuk, K., & Crow, B. (2010). Talking ‘costs’: Seniors, cell phones and the personal and
19 political economy of telecommunications in Canada. *Telecommunications Journal of*
20 *Australia*, *60*(4), 55.1–55.11.
- 21 Senate Canada. (2010, June). *Plan for a digital Canada*. Retrieved from
22 <http://planforadigitalcanada.ca/images/stories/pdf/report.pdf>
- 23 Thulin, E., & Vilhelmson, B. (2009). Mobile phones: Transforming the everyday social
24 communication practice of urban youth. In R. Ling, & S. Campbell (Eds.), *The*
25 *reconstruction of space and time: Mobile communication practices* (pp. 137–158). New
26 Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- 27