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MONITOR

A spiritual connection

Mar 10th 2005
From The Economist print edition

Technology and society: Around the world, mobile phones seem to have a spiritual or supernatural dimension that other forms of technology lack

THOSE who go into the priesthood are said to have a calling from God. Now the purveyors of faith the world over are using mobile phones to give believers a call in a more literal sense. Catholics can sign up for daily inspirational text messages from the pope simply by texting "Pope On" to a special number (53141 in Ireland, for example). The Irish Jesuits offer a service called Sacred Space, accessible via smartphone, which encourages users to spend ten minutes reflecting on a specially chosen scripture for the day. In Taiwan, limited-edition phones made by Okwap, a local handset-maker, offer Matsu wallpaper and religious ringtones, along with a less tangible feature—each one has been specially blessed at a temple to Matsu. And Muslims around the world can use the F7100 handset, launched last July by LG of South Korea, both to remind them of prayer times (the phone has an alarm system that works in 500 cities) and to find the direction of Mecca using the handset's built-in "Mecca indicator" compass (see picture).

Mobile phones also make it easy to donate money to religious groups. In Britain, a company called MS Wireless Marketing offers a "TXT & Donate Islamic Prayer Alert" service for £0.25 (\$0.48) per day. The profits go to Muslim charities such as Muslim Hands and Islamic Relief. There are also dozens of Christian charities that accept text-message donations.

Phones and religious beliefs do not always mix smoothly, however. Finnish authorities shut down a service which claimed to offer text messages from Jesus for €1.20 (\$1.55) each, and bishops in the text-mad Philippines put a stop to people attending confession and receiving absolution via text messages.

That technology and religion can be so intertwined is not new. After all, the first book to roll off Gutenberg's new-fangled printing press was the Bible. But unlike the personal computer, which has remained paradoxically impersonal, the mobile phone has transcended its pragmatic beginnings as a yuppie business tool and has burrowed its way into popular consciousness, says Mizuko Ito, an anthropologist at the University of Southern California. Fashion models don them like jewellery and strut the catwalk, teenage girls in Japan use them as lockets, sticking photographs of their friends into their battery compartments, and some Ghanaians even choose to be buried in giant



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mobile-phone coffins.

Mobile phones are a uniquely personal form of technology, thanks in large part to their mobility. When you leave the house, you probably take your keys, your wallet and your phone. Laptop computers are carried by far fewer people, and do not have the same personal associations. Mobile phones provide scope for self-expression, through the choice of ringtone and screen wallpaper. At the same time, mobile phones' ability to communicate with unseen, distant people using invisible radio waves is almost magical. Indeed, the notion that phones might be capable of supernatural or spiritual communication goes right back to the inventor of the telephone himself, Alexander Graham Bell.

According to Avital Ronell, a professor of philosophy at New York University and the author of "The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, and Electric Speech", Bell was just as interested in using his invention to contact the dead as he was in talking to his associate Thomas Watson. "Bell and Watson had attended regular seances in Salem," says Dr Ronell. Bell even drew up a contract with his brother, agreeing that whoever lived the longest should try to contact the other. For his part, Watson was an avid medium who spent hours listening to the weird hisses and squeals of early telephone lines in case they proved to be the dead trying to make contact.

The telephone still maintains such ghostly connections. In China, people celebrating the Hungry Ghost Festival burn life-sized paper effigies of everything from televisions to mobile phones so that the dead can enjoy them in the afterlife. These phone offerings enable the dead to call each other, rather than the living. "Why shouldn't the dead be as technologically advanced as we are?" asks Genevieve Bell, an anthropologist who works for Intel, the world's largest chipmaker. She spent two years in Asia conducting field research about attitudes to technology in different countries. In parts of southern China, she found, it is customary to take your mobile phone to a local Buddhist monk for blessing.

Even phone numbers can have supernatural connotations. In Beijing, a man recently paid \$215,000 for a lucky phone number. In Cantonese, the number four sounds like the word for death, and is therefore unlucky, while the number eight sounds like the word for fortune, and is therefore lucky. "It's not uncommon even for migrant workers to pay up to a month's salary for a lucky telephone number," says James Katz, professor of communications at Rutgers University. Since phones are the most personal of all high-tech devices, it is hardly surprising that their use should reflect the entire spectrum of personal beliefs.

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Click to buy from Amazon.com: "The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, and Electric Speech", by Avital Ronell (Amazon.co.uk).

Acotel Group provides text messages from the Pope, Irish Jesuits offer Sacred Space for PDAs and LG issued a press release about its F7100 Quiblah phone.

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Answering the call

