

Nomads at last

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Wireless communication is changing the way people work, live, love and relate to places—and each other, says Andreas Kluth

AT THE Nomad Cafe in Oakland, California, Tia Katrina Canlas, a law student at the nearby university in Berkeley, places her double Americano next to her mobile phone and iPod, opens her MacBook laptop computer and logs on to the cafe's wireless internet connection to study for her class on the legal treatment of sexual orientation. She is a regular here but doesn't usually bring cash, so her credit-card statement reads "Nornad, Nomad, Nomad, Nomad". That says it all, she thinks. Permanently connected, she communicates by text, photo, video or voice throughout the day with her friends and family, and does her "work stuff" at the same time. She roams around town, but often alights at oases that cater to nomads.

Christopher Waters, the owner, opened the Nomad Cafe in 2003, just as Wi-Fi "hotspots" were mushrooming all around town. His idea was to provide a watering-hole for "techno-Bedouins" such as himself, he says. Since Bedouins, whether in Arabian deserts or American suburbs, are inherently tribal and social creatures, he understood from the outset that a good oasis has to do more than provide Wi-Fi; it must also become a new—or very old-kind of gathering place. He thought of calling his cafe the "Gypsy Spirit Mission", which also captures the theme of mobility, but settled for the simpler Nomad.

As a word, vision and goal, modern ur-

ban nomadism has had the mixed blessing of a premature debut. In the 1960s and '70s Herbert Marshall McLuhan, the most influential media and communications theorist ever, pictured nomads zipping around at great speed, using facilities on the road and all but dispensing with their homes. In the 1980s Jacques Attali, a French economist who was advising president Francois Mitterrand at the time, used the term to predict an age when rich and uprooted elites would jet around the world in search of fun and opportunity, and poor but equally uprooted workers would migrate in search of a living. In the 1990s Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners jointly wrote the first book with "digital nomad" in the title, adding the bewildering possibilities of the latest gadgets to the vision.

But all of those early depictions and predictions of nomadism arguably missed the point. The mobile lifestyles currently taking shape around the world are nothing like those described in the old books. For this the authors cannot be blamed, since the underlying technologies of genuine and everyday nomadism did not exist even as recently as a decade ago. Mobile phones were already widespread, but they were used almost exclusively for voice calls and were fiendishly hard to connect to the internet and even to computers. Laptop computers and personal digital assistants (PDAs) needed fiddly cables to get on-

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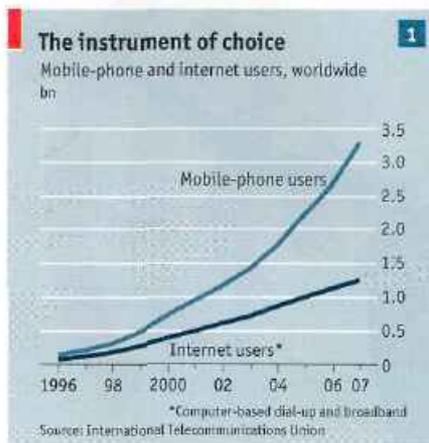
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line, and even then did so at a snail's pace. Reading and sending e-mail on a mobile phone—not to mention synchronising it across several gadgets and computers to create one "virtual" in-box—was unheard of. People took photos using film. There was no Wi-Fi. In short, there were gadgets, but precious little "connectivity".

Astronauts and hermit crabs

Without that missing piece, several misunderstandings took hold that now require correcting. One had to do with all those gadgets. The old mental picture of a nomad invariably had him—mostly him, at that time—lugging lots of them. Since these machines, large and small, were portable, people assumed that they also made their owners mobile. Not so. The proper metaphor for somebody who carries portable but unwieldy and cumbersome infrastructure is that of an astronaut rather than a nomad, says Paul Saffo, a trend-watcher in Silicon Valley. Astronauts must bring what they need, including oxygen, because they cannot rely on their environment to provide it. They are both denned and limited by their gear and supplies.

Around the turn of the century, as some astronauts, typically executive road warriors, got smarter about packing light, says Mr Saffo, they graduated to an intermediate stage, becoming hermit crabs. These are crustaceans that survive by dragging around a cast-off mollusc shell for protection and shelter. In the metaphorical sense, the shell might be a "carry-on" bag on wheels, stuffed full of cables, discs, dongles, batteries, plugs and paper documents (just in case of disc failure). These hermit crabs strike fear into the hearts of seated airline passengers whenever they board, because their shells invariably bang into innocent shins all the way to their

seat. They carry less than astronauts and are thus more mobile—but are still quite heavily laden with gear, mostly as a safeguard against disasters.

Urban nomads have started appearing only in the past few years. Like their antecedents in the desert, they are defined not by what they carry but by what they leave behind, knowing that the environment will provide it. Thus, Bedouins do not carry their own water, because they know where the oases are. Modern nomads carry almost no paper because they access their documents on their laptop computers, mobile phones or online. Increasingly, they don't even bring laptops. Many engineers at Google, the leading internet company and a magnet for nomads, travel with only a BlackBerry, iPhone or other "smart phone". If ever the need arises for a large keyboard and some earnest typing, they sit down in front of the nearest available computer anywhere in the world, open its web browser and access all their documents online.

Another big misunderstanding of previous decades was to confuse nomadism with migration or travel. As the costs of (stationary) telecommunications plummeted, it became fascinating to contemplate "the death of distance" (the title of a book written by Frances Cairncross, then on the staff of *The Economist*). And since the early mobile phones were aimed largely at business executives, it was assumed that nomadism was about corporate travel in particular. And indeed many nomads are frequent flyers, for example, which is why airlines such as Jet-Blue, American Airlines and Continental Airlines are now introducing in-flight Wi-Fi. But although nomadism and travel can coincide, they need not.

Humans have always migrated and travelled, without necessarily living nomadic lives. The nomadism now emerging is different from, and involves much more than, merely making journeys. A modern nomad is as likely to be a teenager in Oslo, Tokyo or suburban America as a jet-setting chief executive. He or she may never have left his or her city, stepped into an aeroplane or changed address. Indeed, how far he moves is completely irrelevant. Even if an urban nomad confines himself to a small perimeter, he nonetheless has a new and surprisingly different relationship to time, to place and to other people. "Permanent connectivity, not motion, is the critical thing," says Manuel Castells, a sociologist at the Annenberg School for Communication, a part of the University

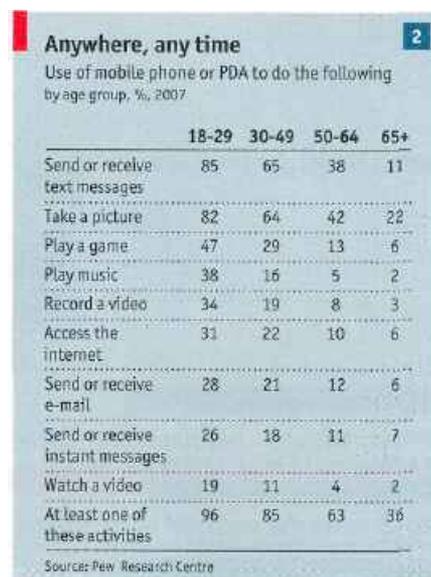
of Southern California, Los Angeles.

This is why a new breed of observers is now joining the ever-present futurists and gadget geeks in studying the consequences of this technology. Sociologists in particular are trying to figure out how mobile communications are changing interactions between people. Nomadism, most believe, tends to bring people who are already close, such as family members, even closer. But it may do so at the expense of their attentiveness towards strangers encountered physically (rather than virtually) in daily life. That has implications for society at large.

Anthropologists and psychologists are investigating how mobile and virtual interaction spices up or challenges physical and offline chemistry, and whether it makes young people in particular more autonomous or more dependent. Architects, property developers and urban planners are changing their thinking about buildings and cities to accommodate the new habits of the nomads that dwell in them. Activists are trying to piggyback on the ubiquity of nomadic tools to improve the world, even as they worry about the same tools in the hands of the malicious. Linguists are chronicling how nomadic communication changes language itself, and thus thought.

Beyond technology

This special report, in presupposing that a wireless world will soon be upon us, will explore these ramifications of mobile technology, rather than the technologies themselves or their business models. But it is



worth making clear that technology underlies all of the changes in today's nomadic societies, so that its march will accelerate them. Wireless data connections, in particular, seem to be getting better all the time. Cellular networks will become faster and more reliable. Short-range Wi-Fi hotspots are popping up in ever more places. And a new generation of wireless technologies is already poised to take over. Regulators have grasped that the airwaves are now among society's most important assets. America, for instance, has just auctioned off a chunk of spectrum with new rules that require the owner to allow any kind of device and software to run on the resulting network.

Devices, too, are on a steep trajectory. Just as Sony's Walkman once planted the notion that music can be mobile, the BlackBerry by Research In Motion (RIM), a Canadian firm, has since 1999 made e-mail on the go seem normal. And just as the personal-computer era entered the mainstream only in the 1980s with Apple's commercialisation of the "graphical user interface", the mobile era arguably began only last summer when the same firm launched the iPhone, with its radically

new and user-friendly touch interface. As a result, Google, for instance, has received 50 times more web-search requests from iPhones this year than from any other mobile handset.

Cumulatively, all of these changes amount to a historic merger, at long last, of two technologies that have already proved revolutionary in their own right. The mobile phone has changed the world by becoming ubiquitous in rich and poor countries alike. The internet has mostly touched rich countries, and rich people in poor countries, but has already changed the way people shop, bank, listen to music, read news and socialise. Now the mobile phone is on course to replace the PC as the primary device for getting online. According to the International Telecommunications Union, 3.3 billion people, more than half the world's population, now subscribe to a mobile-phone service (see chart i, previous page), so the internet at last looks set to change the whole world.

To people in early-adopter countries such as South Korea and Japan this will come as no surprise. (Five of the ten best-selling novels in Japan last year were written on mobile phones.) Nor will it come as

a shock to people in their teens and twenties elsewhere who have never known life without text messages; or to itinerant salesmen and executives who have for years been glued to their BlackBerries day and night. By contrast, many older people will strain to recognise themselves in the behaviour patterns described in this report, and indeed may never adopt them. But the lesson of history is that what the geeks and early adopters do today, the rest of us will probably end up doing tomorrow or the day after. It is the pioneers that set the direction; the mainstream will follow in time.

The most wonderful thing about mobile technology today is that consumers can increasingly forget about how it works and simply take advantage of it. As Ms Canlas sips her Americano and dives into her e-mail in-box at the Nomad Cafe, she gives no thought to the specifications and standards that make her connection possible. It is the human connections that now take over. Since humans, as Sigmund Freud put it, must *arbeitenundlieben*, work and love, in order to find fulfilment, this report will start off by examining how they will work. ■