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# my ears are RINGING

The millions of cell phone users in the U.S. might be pushing talk to new levels

BY AYISHA YAHYA  
NEWS EDITOR

John is cheating on his girlfriend. Wendy is getting an i-pod for her birthday. Peter just maxed out his credit cards and is quitting school.

You don't know any of these people, yet you know the most intimate details of their lives after being subjected to loud cell phone conversations, forcing an unintended eavesdrop.

Cell phones are everywhere. A quick tour of the EMU reveals multitudes of students chatting away. These little gadgets that keep people connected anywhere and at any time — except in some campus buildings where finding a signal is like searching for gold — have America talking. Almost 175.5 million people have cell phones in the United States, according to the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association. Compare this to just about 4 million cell phones in 1990.

And now people can do more than talk. They send text messages, take pictures and browse the Internet.

To many, cell phones have become an integral part of life.

"It seems to make people accessible," said associate philosophy professor John Lysaker, who has studied the philosophy of technology. "It increases our opportunity for social engagement."

Lysaker also attributes the cell phone craze to a "marketing blitz."

"We're led to believe that we need them," Lysaker said.

Many cell phone users say they like the connectivity that cell phones allow.

Freshman Francesca MacCormack, originally from San Francisco, has had her cell phone for two years. She said she uses it to stay in touch with people in her home area — MacCormack kept her California number so people at home won't have to dial long distance. The phone also comes in handy because people can reach her at any time, no matter where she is.

"I'm never in my dorm room," she said.

Freshman Mara Harman said she doesn't have long conversations, but she does use her cell phone frequently. Her cell phone makes her feel connected.

"I just feel secure," she said. "I have to have it with me all the time. If I leave it in my room, I feel worried."

She later admitted that she would probably "go insane" if she left it behind.

Sophomore Eric Kaltenbacher, admits he is "addicted" to his cell phone, which has his favorite song, "Numb," by Linkin Park as a ring tone. He said he talks to his friends for at least two to three hours per day.

"I can take videos on it, pictures — it's one of the newer cell phones," Kaltenbacher said.

Nikki Barker said she uses her phone to make plans with friends, although she doesn't use it very much. Barker says she does get surprised at people who spend every spare moment with phones pressed to the sides of their heads.

"People have it glued to their ear



BRET FURTWANGLER | GRAPHIC ARTIST

when they are walking to class," Barker said. "You just want to fill space with words."

Lysaker said cell phones make it easier to have "meaningless exchanges."

"I've heard these conversations, they're not saying anything," Lysaker said.

It is this desire to talk all the time that some say makes cell phones so intrusive. While cell phones can be life-savers in emergencies and good for making plans, the need to stay connected can go too far.

Some students pick up their cell phones in the library, strange ring tones suddenly interrupt lectures, and some people don't listen to professors at all because they are busy sending text messages.

"I think it's annoying when it goes off in class," MacCormack said, adding that she has a classmate whose phone had gone off at least five times this term. MacCormack said she has even been in a class where someone actually picked up the phone in the middle of a lecture.

Kaltenbacher said his phone has brought him its share of embarrassing moments. During a business class, the phone rang and the teacher picked it up and started talking.

"I always forget to turn it off," he said. "Teachers definitely don't like that."

Melodious or annoying rings, followed by conversation, have been heard at the most inappropriate times and places. In restaurants and movie theaters, in the middle of a wedding ceremony or at a funeral sermon.

"I think the best thing about them is that it gives us this connectivity," said Susan Magee, co-author of the book "The Jerk with the Cell Phone: A Survival Guide for the Rest of Us." That connectivity is also the downside, she said.

"It's easy to lose the boundary, and it's easy to forget there are people around you," Magee said. Other people's loud conversations only serve to stress other people, she added.

Magee gave examples from the book of how attached people have become to their gadgets, so attached that they will go to great lengths to save them. One man put his hand

down a toilet to retrieve his phone and got stuck. Another wanted to stick his hand in a pot of hot chocolate fondue because his phone had fallen inside. And in an even more daring feat, one man in Mexico faced the jaws of death by entering a lion's cage to get his phone.

Many people complain that cell phone users have no etiquette. When the Federal Communications Commission announced it was considering allowing cell phones on planes, some said it was a recipe for disaster.

In an article on CNN/Money, one person questioned, "What are the airlines and FCC thinking?"

"Can you imagine being in the middle seat between two business people making phone calls for three hours?" he asked.

"I think people are going to go berserk," Magee said, adding that unless airlines have clear guidelines, the potential for more "airline rage" is high.

Some cell phone users don't only test people's tempers, they might also be endangering human life. Legislators around the nation are worried about the dangers that exist when people pay more attention to their conversations than to the road. New York was the first state to ban hand-held cell phone use in 2001, according to newsday.com. New Jersey and Washington, D.C. also adopted the ban, and at least 13 other states are considering introducing similar legislation.

Cell phones may also affect how people live their lives in general.

Lysaker suggests that the notion of being available all the time expands the workplace into personal life and the "home is being colonized by the office."

"It extends the workplace everywhere" he said, adding that all significant technological inventions impact people's relationship with the world. Lysaker said he only uses his phone for emergencies.

"I don't know my cell phone number because I don't want people to call me," he said. There are numerous stories that illustrate just how embedded these gadgets have become in daily existence, but they will have to wait — this reporter's cell phone is ringing.

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