The Mobile and Me:
Canadian Youth Negotiate the Impact of Mobile Phone Regulation

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Introduction

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. It is also important to understand how telecommunications company policies and pricing affect how teens and parents use their phones" (Lenhart et al. 2010, 10). Taking up this challenge of how mobiles are marketed towards and perceived by young Canadians, this paper adapts a framework developed by Hughie Mackay and Gareth Gillespie (1992), who argue 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.

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 uses of the mobile phone by a selected group of Canadian youth aged between 20 and 24 comprise the third sphere. Through focus groups, youth shared how their uses of the mobile relate to the particular context of Canada's wireless service industry, with discussions revolving around their understanding of the economics of the mobile phone, including payment, service contracts and pricing plans.

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 nearly ubiquitous – 99 percent of the population subscribes to mobile services – the younger demographic is seen as a key site for emerging trends in wireless communication (CWTA 2010). By exploring the practices of young people within the broader context of the national wireless industry and its marketing strategies, this paper aims to highlight how the economics of youths' mobile phone use might impinge on regulatory decisions currently under debate in Canada's telecommunications sector.

Regulation: Shaping the Mobile Terrain

Canadian Mobile Service Providers

The shape of Canada's wireless industry, dominated by three established telecommunications giants – Rogers Communications Inc., BCE's Bell Mobility Inc. and Telus Communications Company, reflects both constraints of mobile phone technology and the legislative parameters set forth in the Federal government's telecommunications policies. According to a 2010 report from Bank of America Merrill Lynch, the 'big three' players in the industry account for 95% of the Canadian market, enjoying the highest profit margins of any wireless corporations in the developed world (Nowak 2010). Part of this dominance has to do with the physical exigencies of Canada: providing wireless infrastructure to a relatively sparse population distributed across a massive land area is challenging, and only larger conglomerates seem able to exercise this kind of reach with their network coverage (Senate Canada 2010, 33). For example, industry leader Rogers had established a GSM (Global System for Mobile communication) network in 2002, overlaying the newer digital standard over its existing analog network to cover most of Canada's population. Around the same time, Bell and Telus had been operating on the CDMA (Code Division Multiple Access) system, which was recently overhauled in their jointly built national HSPA (High Speed Packet Access) network in 2009. This move brought Bell and Telus up to speed with Rogers in competition for offering the newest mobile communication technologies that only function on these international digital network standards, mainly smartphones and tablets, further solidifying the tripartite structure of Canada's wireless industry.

Regulatory Regime

Along with the infrastructural parameters that have contributed to the dominance of the big three in Canada's wireless industry, regulatory restrictions on foreign ownership have prevented major global competitors from breaking into the market. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the country's central regulatory body, has established and policed rules on foreign ownership and control of both broadcasting and telecommunications services since its formation in 1976. Traditionally, these ownership restrictions have applied to broadcasting and telecommunications companies that were not typically as profitable as the current big three wireless providers have been recently. Public outcry over the way that Rogers, Bell and Telus have abused their massive market share by price gouging consumers —the OECD's Communications Outlook for 2009 reported that Canada had the third highest prices of all 30 member countries— has led the CRTC to consider strategies for increasing the competition among wireless service providers (Senate Canada 2010, 43).

As the winning strategy, Industry Canada held the 2008 Advanced Wireless Services spectrum auction that deliberately set aside the 40 MHz portion of the electromagnetic spectrum – one of the series of wavelengths that carry wireless signals – for licensing to new entrants to the market (Senate Canada 2010, 11). In addition to generating over $4B in profit for the Federal government, the 2008 spectrum auction ended with the big three retaining and expanding their spectrum licenses, while new entrants, including Shaw Communications

Inc., Quebecor Inc.-Videotron Ltée., Bragg Communications, Data & Audio-Visual Enterprises (DAVE) Wireless Inc., Public Mobile and Globalive Wireless, each bid for a share of the 40 MHz spectrum (Canadian Press 2008).

This shift in the landscape of wireless providers in Canada reflects the Federal government's wider emphasis on the role of wireless communications in its most recent agenda for the 'digital economy' (Sawchuk & Crow 2010). By holding a number of spectrum auctions – since the 2008 auction, Industry Canada has developed policies for additional licenses and reallocations of spectrum – the then Minority Conservative government was setting up its recommendations for a 'national digital strategy' to involve the broader liberalization of foreign ownership restrictions in telecommunications (Government of Canada 2010). As Industry Minister Tony Clement proposed in his May 2010 announcement of consultations on foreign ownership, liberalization will take shape in one of three forms: removing all restrictions; increasing the limit of foreign investment from the current 20 to 49 per cent; or lifting restrictions for carriers with less than 10 per cent market share (CBC News 2011a). By allowing increased foreign ownership, the government hopes to attract investment in Canada's wireless infrastructure, claiming that consumers will see benefits in service quality and affordability (Senate Canada 2010, 45).

Table 1: Wireless Market in Canada, Winter 2011

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	Koodoo Mobile, Mike	28%
Public Mobile		Not known at this time
Globalive	Wind Mobile	Not known at this time
Mobilicity (formerly DAVE Wireless)		Not known at this time
SaskTel Mobility		Not known at this time
Videotron		Not known at this time

These regulatory transitions meant to increase competition in Canada's relatively closed wireless industry have not been completely without friction, however, as shown in the case of Globalive's WIND mobile brand. After purchasing a spectrum license in the 2008 Industry Canada auction, the Toronto-based company proposed to launch its services across Canada, excepting Quebec, the following year. Despite passing Industry Canada's ownership test during the auction, the CRTC issued a decision in late 2009 that Globalive did not meet ownership and control rules, due to heavy foreign investment from Egyptian firm Orascom Telecom Holding SAE (CRTC 2009). As the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada claimed in support of the CRTC's decision, "jobs, our position as a technology leader, and our distinct Canadian media voice are the hidden costs" of cheaper cell phone service from foreign-owned wireless companies (Coles 2010). Yet soon after the CRTC's announcement, the Federal cabinet overruled its decision, allowing Globalive to proceed with the implementation of its WIND brand in urban markets including Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver. Yet by February 2011, the Federal court ruled that cabinet's overriding of the CRTC's decision was null and void since it was based on "errors of law" (CBC News 2011). A few days later, Industry Minister Clement announced that Ottawa would move to appeal the Federal court's decision, claiming that Globalive does qualify as a Canadian company, and that the WIND brand fills a need in the Canadian wireless market, where consumers are demanding increased choice and competition (CBC News 2011a). Globalive has also said it will also seek an appeal, so that, in the words of chairman Anthony Lacavera, the company "can continue to focus on bringing wireless innovation and competition to the marketplace" (Globalive 2011).

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

Attracting young people to enhanced features and content for their mobiles is also a very lucrative enterprise for service providers. An estimated $176M was spent in 2008 by consumers on mobile content and applications, including $43M for personalized content (downloads of ringtones, wallpaper, logos, skins, screensavers, etc.), $39M on mobile games, $23M on music, $17M on mobile TV, and an additional $30M on miscellaneous content such as entertainment, weather, and emergency services (Ovum Consulting 2010). Current consumer revenues on such features is now even higher given the popularity of smartphones such as the iPhone and Android, the development of diverse applications, and the seamless integration of social networking sites such as Facebook into these phones.

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

Marketing: The Positioning of Young People in Mobile Phone Advertisements

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

The television advertising produced by Canada's big three tend to focus on the quality of service consumers might enjoy on their extensive wireless networks. Rogers's most notorious TV ad campaign, for example, involves a 30-something office worker who never seems to get decent reception on his non-Rogers cell phone in situations where his rival colleague – on the Rogers network – always (vexingly) appears to enjoy perfect call quality. Another set of Rogers ads, more explicitly targeted to the youth market, features a group of college-age friends to highlight pricing plans like the MY5 buddy list (a feature that allows users to create their 'calling circle' allowing for unlimited voice, text or video messages, depending on which package they choose). In the sole ad where the young friends promote service quality is for mobile Internet service, a camping trip goes awry when a bear appears to be sending photos from the young man's cellphone over "Canada's fastest high-speed network."

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

Ads that demonstrate the features of mobile devices, particularly those of smartphones, figure in the youth-oriented campaigns of Rogers and in the more general series of cute animal ads from Telus. In introducing the smartphones available on its network, Telus ran its "Epic" ad, where a group of meerkats gaze into the distance, while triumphant music plays and a series of inter-titles announce, "We believe in liberty. We believe in community. We believe in instant weather forecasts. We believe in smartphones for all."

Contrasting the not apparently age-biased "smartphones for all" message, as indicated through what is framed as a universally appealing feature of instant weather forecasts, Rogers shows smartphones in situations that are meant to speak more directly to young people's social experiences. In its newest ad to this effect, Rogers promotes its Data Share plan by showing how a young woman travelling on a coach bus can pass the time with both her smartphone and tablet, which share the same data plan. The disconnect between low-budget bus travel and her pristine, high-tech gadgets is elided, as the ad attempts to show how these expensive devices have been woven into the fabric of young people's everyday, budget-conscious lives. Earlier Rogers ads represented less cognitive dissonance in their attempt to illustrate how MP3 phones might occupy a central place in youth experience, influenced as it is by music-based subcultures. This earlier trend seems to have been transposed onto smartphones' capacity to not only play music but HD video, in addition to a host of Internet-based features and applications. Rogers ads show these phones as integrated into young peoples' lives, but they don't necessarily promote affordable pricing.

In other brands' campaigns directed toward young people, smartphones also tend to dominate; but unlike the Rogers ads, other brands attempt to show how these devices might actually be affordable for lower income consumers. The principal trend among youth-directed ads is to promote special pricing deals and plans, while not compromising on phone features. Discount subsidiaries Fido, Koodo and Virgin Mobile all hinge their advertising on this kind of pricing. Virgin Mobile's sexy ad campaign targets young consumers through attractive models and blaring dance music, while promoting deals like "3 months unlimited Web on-the-go" or "$50 activation bonus." Similarly, but trading on humour rather than sex appeal, Koodo's current "El Tabador" ads feature an animated *lucha libre* (Mexican "free wrestling") figurine, saving young people money and aggravation through "$0 phones with no fixed-term contracts," along with extras like "social networking for $10 a month." These ads show how young people might be able to afford smartphone features by promoting bonuses and discounted pricing, and in the case of Fido, also by replacing their home phones. In the Fido ad "Stairs," for example, a college-age 'dude' sits in his messy room recounting a tale of falling down the stairs due to the inconvenience of his home phone. The moral of his tale is to replace the home phone with a smartphone, in this case the BlackBerry Pearl, on one of Fido's talk and text plans "from $15 per month, with no system access fees." This ad conveys the importance of having a smartphone for young people, which is shown to be feasible only if they take advantage of special pricing deals while eliminating other expenses, such as a landline.

Yet while smartphones are presented here as necessities for young people who not only talk and text, but use social networking sites such as Facebook on an everyday basis, the newer entrants to Canada's wireless service market base their advertising on a no-frills approach to mobile communication. Eschewing trendy smartphones, WIND Mobile and Public Mobile promote low pricing plans for talk and text service only, featuring actors across a diverse age range who are shown to prefer basic handsets that don't require data plans or Internet connectivity. For example, WIND Mobile's Holiday 2010 ads offer pricing plans of "$17.50/month unlimited province-wide talk + global text for 6 months (For a limited time. Conditions apply)" and "Unlimited Canada-wide talk and text for up to 1 year, $25 (From any WIND zone. For a limited time. Conditions apply)."

Similarly, Public Mobile's pricing plans cover talk and text services, both marketed as "unlimited", for a fixed monthly rate ranging from $24 to $40. The word "unlimited" is key in these ads, which aim to highlight how incumbent carriers place time limits on their rates of service. Mobilicity's ads even extend the claim of "unlimited" service to include data, advertising "Unlimited data, North American calling, Global text messaging, Voicemail, Caller ID plus much more. (Taxes are extra. Terms and conditions apply). $60 value: now only $40 per month." What these new entrants have in common with their promotion of unlimited plans is an attempt to include the fine print in making the pricing structure clearer for consumers, who are positioned as a budget-conscious group that includes young people. Trading on Canadian consumers' frustration with hidden fees, time limits and rate restrictions, these ads explicitly aim to provide a sense of greater transparency in wireless service marketing.

Overall, the television advertisements show broad patterns in the way that mobile phones and wireless services are marketed to Canadians. The big three tend to market their services mainly in terms of network speed, size and quality, while their discount subsidiaries more explicitly target young people with cool smartphones at low rates. The new entrants to the market couple their claims for low rates with unlimited service, working to provide pricing transparency rather than trendy features like social networking or infrastructural dominance in service area and quality. As an early response to the campaigns of these new entrants, Rogers's Chat'r discount brand directly references the poor service quality of brands like WIND, Public and Mobilicity. But again, this service quality campaign features office workers, indicating that young people are not the target market when it comes to the functioning of the network. Rather, the most prevalent trope in ads for younger consumers has to do with unlimited service at low prices, across both slick and no-frills advertising campaigns.

Pricing & Transparency

The deals featured in mobile phone marketing campaigns directed toward young Canadians offer some insight into how pricing schemes function within the promotional economy of advertising. In all cases, even those that explicitly attempt to be transparent, ads that revolve around competitive pricing work to conceal, in varying degrees, the actual terms and conditions of service contracts. The lack of transparency in pricing promotions is endemic to much commercial advertising; however, it reveals some distinctive contours of the mobile phone industry in Canada.

As one of the most profitable Canadian industries, wireless services comprise the largest component in total telecommunications revenues (41%), generating $16.9B in 2009 (CWTA 2010). This high profit margin may be correlated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) finding that Canada ranks among OECD countries with the highest priced wireless service (OECD 2009). High prices for wireless services contrast the relatively affordable wireless prices in other developed nations, as well as the globally low prices for landline communications in Canada. With wireless prices in Canada thus standing out as unreasonably high, consumers have been increasingly vocal about the perceived lack of fair pricing. In a national series that ran in March 2010, the CBC's Marketplace investigated the story of "Canada's worst cell phone bill," an indication of rising public anger directed toward the dubious price gouging practices of the big three (Sawchuk & Crow 2010). As the Marketplace story concludes, cellphone service actually costs carriers very little, compared to the "astronomical and sometimes mystifying charges" faced by consumers (Marketplace 2010).

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

Thus despite the diverse attempts of mobile carriers to trade on trust in their promotional materials, an atmosphere of cynicism seems to pervade the public attitude toward Canadian wireless companies. Globally high prices for wireless services, which are not regulated by the CRTC, seem as though they will endure given the uncertain situation of market newcomers. As the only recourse for consumer protection in the mobile phone sector, the independent, not-for-profit Commissioner for Complaints for Telecommunication Services (CCTS) claims that the price charged by a service provider "is a business decision that it alone is entitled to make. Marketplace competition means that you may find a better deal with another provider" (CCTS 2011). Yet while marketplace competition has so far not resulted in fair and/or lower prices for Canadians, consumers – including youth – have become weary by the promises of mobile phone marketing.

Appropriation: Young Canadians Talk About Mobile Phones

The lack of transparency in Canadian mobile phone advertising, as an extension of the consolidation of the industry in this country, has engendered a deep-seated mistrust of mobile service providers by many young Canadians. For this pilot study, we conducted informal focus groups with students in Concordia University's undergraduate program in Communication Studies.[1] In total, we interviewed four participants between 20 and 24 years of age. While our group of participants was small and thus not representative of young people or even university students, our in-depth discussions with them have allowed us to provide a detailed account of the constellations of mobility apparent in their attitudes toward mobile phones. Based on a series of open-ended questions, the participants discussed their relationships to mobiles in terms of the features of their handsets, their uses of the phones, social conventions, advertising, pricing plans and dealings with service providers. Overall, their reflections tended toward acknowledging the embeddedness of mobile phones within their everyday communicative ecology, accompanied by skepticism around the advertising, pricing schemes and customer service of mobile providers. In our discussion of these issues in greater detail below, quotations from the focus group participants are used to illustrate the way that they negotiate the mobile phone landscape in Canada.

The indispensable mobile phone: uses and conventions

According to our participants in the focus groups, they use their mobile phones multiple times throughout the day, and despite the sometimes aggravating expectation to be 'always on,' mobile devices are seen as basically indispensable. This attitude is consistent with the most recent figures from the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, which

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[1] Students were recruited through a group email sent to former members of a Fall 2010 course in the Communication Studies department. The email asked if students would be willing to spend an hour participating in an informal focus group over lunch time in January 2011. In return, participants were offered an assortment of snacks and refreshments. Participants consented to the use of their first names and ages in any citation of their contributions to the discussion. The focus groups were audio recorded using an Edirol recorder and iPhone's Voice Recorder application, uploaded to a computer as an audio file, and then transcribed into word processing software.

show that over 99 percent of the country's population is served by wireless coverage (CWTA 2010). And as the Harris-Decima *2008 Wireless Attitudes Study* reports, cell phone penetration is highest among Canadians aged 18 to 34 (Harris-Decima 2008, 10). In keeping with these statistics, our participants claimed that it was highly unusual to know someone without a mobile phone. As Michelle claimed, young people who don't own or use a mobile are viewed suspiciously: "you feel the anxiety socializing with people that don't have it, because it's just a totally different set of habits and standards to what you're used to." The habits and standards that go along with mobile phone usage for young people came up time and time again in our discussions with participants, and suggest how mobiles have become embedded into the social practices of their everyday lives.

Beyond being useful for coordinating meetings, making calls or feeling safe, mobiles perform a variety of functions that the young people said they would have difficulty living without. These functions range from the simple act of changing ringtones or alarm music (as Lubomir reported enjoying with his Sony Ericsson handset), to maintaining long-distance social ties through BlackBerry's BBM messaging system (as Lara does), to using a translation app on the iPhone to understand concepts presented in class (an example offered by Véronique). Particularly for those with smartphones, the participants were able to list off a variety of features and applications that they use on a regular basis, and that they would miss if something happened to their mobiles. As Véronique recounted, although she could navigate without it, finding her way to a recent meeting without the GPS on her iPhone was stressful and unnerving.

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

Perhaps most indicative of the way that the participants are working to negotiate the habits and standards of mobile phone use, a large portion of the focus group time was spent on discussing social norms around texting. According to the Harris-Decima study, the frequency of text messaging nearly doubled between 2006 and 2008, with the highest percentage of texters aged between 13 and 34 (Harris-Decima 2008, 14). Yet in that study, talking was still reported to be the "most important" function of the cell phone for all age groups (15). In our focus groups, in line with the Pew study's more recent finding that since 2008, "cell-phone texting has become the preferred channel of basic communication" for youth (Lenhart et al. 2010, 2), texting was seen as the most frequent means of mobile communication among young people, and was viewed paradoxically as both less and more intrusive than calling. So while texting was seen as the easiest way to set up meetings or have more private conversations in public spaces, it was also framed as disruptive and rude. As Michelle advised, even though texting has become such an entrenched practice, making it difficult to notice when it might be disrespectful, "when someone's talking, at least say 'excuse me'." Discussions like this one around text etiquette led many of the participants to claim that calling was more to-the-point and therefore less intrusive, but at the same time, they acknowledged that texting might be more appropriate than talking in places like public transit or at the hair salon. The social norms around texting proved to be an important theme for participants to express in terms of the double standards (as Lara confirmed, it's annoying when other people are texting on their phones all the time, but it's difficult to not do that yourself) and contradictory attitudes towards cell phone use among young people.

Service providers: from bad to worse

Another aspect of the conflicting attitudes that came up during our discussions of texting involved the pricing plans of wireless carriers. The fact that texting was often more affordable than calling also contributed to its widespread use among the participants and their friends. These young Canadians have significant justification to be concerned with mobile phone pricing, given the lack of substantial competition and globally high prices among the country's wireless industry players. Overall, the feelings they expressed about wireless providers were mostly negative, as they shared stories of poor customer service and convoluted contractual terms. In fact, as Lubomir contended, bad news stories about wireless carriers come up on a regular basis among his peers, where "people only talk about it if they're complaining; there's nothing good to say about it."

In terms of customer service, it seemed to be the consensus that calling companies to complain, to the point of threatening to switch carriers, was the only way to receive better service. For some of the participants, these dealings with service providers were still taken care of by their parents; for instance, Lara noted that her mom deals with billing and service complaints to Telus about their family plan. While her dad had gone through a "big feud" with Telus and since switched providers, Lara described how her mom handled the rest of the family's service issues by leveraging the whole family's participation in the plan. Similarly, Michelle discussed her former family plan subscription to Bell Mobility, which she had to leave because the billing was so convoluted and because in general, "everyone hates Bell." Now Michelle has a mobile phone from Virgin, and despite initially seeming "more accessible and easy," her experiences with customer service have been frustrating: "every representative had something different to say." Regardless of the carrier, it appeared that the participants almost expected that customer service would be a hassle. As Lubomir said, although he is with Fido like the rest of his family and has so far not had an exceptionally difficult time with their representatives, his girlfriend had been swindled into paying for repairs to her Telus handset that she didn't need to operate the phone: "basically they screwed her."

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

The lack of transparency in mobile advertising

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

Michelle's experience with Virgin Mobile was exemplary of the way that the advertising and pricing plans target younger consumers in particular, while ultimately misleading then into expensive services. The seemingly uncomplicated pricing plans drew Michelle to the company, although she was unimpressed with its racy ad campaign, including a billboard of a young woman laying on a couch with the double entendre tagline "c'est meilleur avec Virgin" that looms over Concordia's downtown campus. Regardless of the sexiness and, as Michelle put it, "MTV generation" ethos of Virgin's ads, they offered a \$30/month unlimited texting plan that fit her need for a no-frills handset with basic functionality. Yet even though she signed up for this lower-cost plan with a basic handset, Michelle's bill tended to be consistently higher than advertised: "I feel like whatever plan I get, I'm always going over, and 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 piece of crap." Her frustration at Virgin's misleading pricing scheme was matched by an equally exasperated attitude about the company's customer service, that simultaneously panders to youth through its casual tone while never satisfactorily explaining the extra charges accrued with each bill. Her experience with Virgin has led Michelle to be eager to switch providers once her contract expires in another year.

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

Lara's sense of feeling cheated provided an apt description of the participants' attitudes toward mobile phone advertising. While the ads claim to offer affordable pricing plans and special deals for younger customers, the young people in this group were well aware of the fact that, as Lubomir said, "the ads are completely not in synch with what it is on paper." Especially after the participants had seen what mobile phone service was like in other places, including the U.S., Australia and European countries, they felt that despite their promotional strategies for low pricing, Canadian wireless companies were price gouging consumers. Because of this perceived unfair pricing, Lubomir mentioned that he hasn't purchased $10/month call display as part of his plan: "It's not worth $10. It is important, but I mean that's a little ridiculous. Just because they know that everyone wants it, I feel like they're jacking the price up." Lara agreed, saying that Canadian wireless carriers charge unfair prices "because they can," obscuring these charges in assorted hidden fees. The incongruity between the plans advertised in mobile providers' advertisements and the cost of the actual monthly bill resulted in participants' feeling exasperated with the way that wireless service in Canada is, as Lara characterized it, "just not straightforward at all."

Consensus: mistrust – careful shaping of mobile usage

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

As such, even once they had decided to deal with a particular provider, the feeling of mistrust remained. As Lara and Lubomir had discussed about price gouging, it seemed to be an inevitable practice on the part of Canadian wireless carriers. And so the participants had each cultivated usage strategies to cope with the high costs of mobile service. Balking at the $10/month charge for call display with Fido, Lubomir declined to purchase the service, choosing instead to simply pick up the phone whenever it rings to find out who is calling: "If someone is calling, I *must* pick up." Similarly, since she has a BlackBerry, Lara detailed how she prefers to use the free BBM messaging system over regular texting, noting how she tends to communicate more with her contacts who are also on the BlackBerry system since it incurs no extra charge. Michelle's strategy for keeping her costs low, although not always successful once her bill came in, was to have an older handset with fewer features. These everyday ways of negotiating high costs for cellphone service in Canada show how young people's cynical attitudes toward providers contribute to their negotiated uses of mobile communication.

Conclusions for Policymaking

In the current landscape of Canadian wireless service providers, the big three incumbent carriers, along with their subsidiary brands, were viewed by the young people in our study with a significant degree of cynicism. As a kind of 'necessary evil,' our participants claimed that wireless carriers engage in deliberate price gouging, where their promotional materials obscure hidden fees to the point where, as Véronique said, "I always feel that there is something under that is manipulating." The newer entrants to Canada's wireless marketplace since the main spectrum auction in 2008 have played on these public feelings of mistrust in their advertising campaigns. Yet regulatory hurdles, along with a lack of word-of-mouth support (as noted by our participants), have made the new entrants' task to break into the Canadian wireless market not without its challenges.

For young Canadians negotiating wireless service, the lack of competition in the industry has served to circumscribe their means of appropriating mobile technology, alongside inviting a cynical attitude toward the misleading advertising of dominant service providers. In this climate, new regulatory paradigms could potentially bolster consumer sovereignty, especially as mobile technologies become ever more pervasive and indispensable to Canadians. For instance, Bill 133, recently proposed in the Ontario Legislature, would require wireless carriers to comply to a number of consumer protection stipulations in order to "provide transparency and protection for consumers of wireless telephone services, smart phone services and data services in Ontario" (Legislative Assembly of Ontario 2010). Such legislation mandating increased transparency and fair business practices fills a need in the current regime of consumer protection, limited to the CCTS as an independent complaints body. By implementing legislation that would alter the marketing practices of the wireless industry in Canada, new legislation would complement the current complaints resolution framework, which has proven insufficient for addressing consumers' concerns about the unfair pricing schemes of wireless carriers.

Potential regulatory changes that would entail mandated transparency in advertising hold implications for all consumers, not only young Canadians. Yet younger users of mobile phones remain a crucial demographic in terms of marketing, but also in that they constitute a particularly active group of mobile users. The young Canadians we spoke with conveyed an enthusiasm about mobile communication, often seeing their devices as extensions of themselves despite the drawbacks of perpetual availability. In seeing their mobile phones as inevitable technologies of everyday life, they confirmed the broader trend for young people to eschew landline communication (Lenhart et al. 2010, 45). In their move away from the established landline infrastructure in Canada, this group of young people have transposed the expectation of an affordable communications infrastructure onto wireless service, and this is the locus for their frustrations about the opaque and unfair pricing plans offered to mobile users. Despite the barriers to increased transparency and competition in Canada's wireless industry, talking with this group of young people has highlighted how marketing campaigns are not succeeding in selling consumers on their sovereignty. Young Canadians' increasing frustration with unfair pricing and business practices has begun to put the onus on providers and regulators to develop fair and effective wireless industry policies for the future.

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