Organization of the social sphere and typology of the residential setting: How the adoption of the mobile phone affects sociability in rural and urban locations

Leopoldina Fortunati [a,*], Sakari Taipale [b]

[a] University of Udine, Faculty of Education, Department of Human Sciences, Via Prasecco 3, 33170 Pordenone, Italy
[b] University of Jyväskylä, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, P.O. Box 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that the possession of the mobile phone plays in the organization of the relational sphere at a social level, in different geographical settings. The research questions were: is the possession of a mobile phone more connected to urban or to rural life, and does the possession of a mobile phone influence differently the organization of the social sphere in rural and urban settings? Data on the possession of mobile phones, the frequency of forms of communicative sociability, and various socio-demographic variables were collected by means of a phone survey in 2009. The sample is representative of the population in the five most populous and industrialized European countries: Italy, France, UK, Germany and Spain ($N = 7255$). The study shows that there is not a dichotomy between rural towns and urban territories regarding the possession of mobile phones. In addition, the study shows that the mobile phone is significantly related to the majority of forms of sociability, especially to those forms such as going out to restaurants, cinemas, and theatres, and visiting friends or inviting them to one's own home. However, visiting relatives or inviting them to one's home is not related, and participation in civil society activities is not connected to the possession of mobile phones.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how the organization of the relational sphere at a social level in different geographical settings is associated with the possession of a mobile phone. The issues we wanted to investigate were: first, the relationship between the possession of a mobile phone and either urban or rural life and, second, the relationship between the organization of the social sphere and the possession of a mobile phone in rural and urban settings. The first issue arises from the need to clarify ambivalent and even contradictory results coming from various waves of studies addressing the question of the

relationship between ICTs (information and communication technologies), in particular the mobile phone, and the rural/urban environment [1–3]. A first wave of studies showed a correlation between the urban setting and the diffusion and appropriation of ICTs, while other more recent studies found that the situation is much more complex since rural areas are not necessarily less equipped than urban areas. Probably the lack of clarity and of coherence, which characterizes the results of research regarding the relationship between the mobile phone and the rural/urban environment, is a consequence of the fact that these results are not sufficiently connected to any historical moment [4]. Thus, there is the need to "historicize" them. In fact, if we put these studies in an historical perspective, we are able to take into account the important social phenomena and processes that intervened at a macro level in society, in the territorial division and organization

* Corresponding author. Tel./fax: +39 (0) 49 8763612.
E-mail addresses: fortunati.deluca@tin.it (L. Fortunati), sakari.taipale@jyu.fi (S. Taipale).

of labor which changed tremendously the socio-economic structuring of societies.

Not wrongly, at the beginning of the diffusion of the mobile phone, this device was considered to be an emblem of metropolitan life and of (post) modernity. It was, in fact, seen as providing people with a higher degree of individuality in terms of communication and social assembling [5–10]. Surely, at the early stages of its diffusion, the mobile telephone was mainly an urban tool ([11]: p. 53) and these studies read correctly the association between the big cities and the mobile phone. However, this vision, which sustained the "urban turn" studies, was based on the distinction between urban and rural as opposites, with the consequence that their results were quite generic: up to which dimension did the city maintain this association with a higher diffusion of the mobile phone? On top of this open question, it was not clear whether the big cities arrived first in the appropriation of this device, just because of the higher speed of mobile phone adoption, or whether it was a problem of more structural correspondence between the mobile phone and the urban way of life with all its characteristics: more mobility, more diffusion of higher education, more complexity in the organization of the social sphere. Studies, which have pointed out that the adoption rates are first higher in cities but differences between urban and rural regions tend to shrink as telecommunication becomes more affordable ([12]: p. 599) and ([13]: p. 37), provide some clarification for this issue. Yet their contributionis not sufficient to understand it in a structural and coherent way.

Looking at the sociological literature on the whole, it is evident that the studies on the relationship between public space and new technology have been dominated in this first stage of mobile phone diffusion by the "urban turn". In the mid-1990s, Graham and Marvin ([14]: p. 378) proclaimed that "what is emerging is a more totally urbanized world, where rural spaces and lifestyles are being drawn into an urban realm because of the time-space transcending capabilities of telecommunications and fast transportation networks". The works by Manuel Castells ([15]: p. 440) and Aurigi ([16]: p. 47) can also be seen in the same vein. Later, the blurring of the urban–rural distinction became a much more debated issue in social studies. This shift in the perspective of mobile phone studies was necessary, given the fact that the diffusion of the mobile phone had, in the meantime, reached more and more people and the reorganization of the "territory" in industrialized countries had proceeded at a good pace. The open question at that time was: would the connection of the mobile phone to urban settings continue? [17].

With this new approach, it was possible to incorporate into the analysis important social and organizational issues involving the transformation of the specific missions of the different types of territories [18,19]. According to this debate, and to geographers' contributions, with the development of labor mechanization and automation, which decreased the labor requirements of the primary and extractive industries, many enterprises originally considered that "urban" began relocating to the countryside [20,21]. On the other hand, the rise of the service sector and information systems has contributed to the influx of workers from the countryside to urban areas ([22]: pp. 3–9).

As a consequence, many people today reside in one type of area but work in another, maybe far away. This implies that the sphere of their everyday life expands over several localities, with the consequence that people experience both these dimensions in their everyday life.

In this framework, the bi-polar distinction between "urban" and "rural" has become less useful as an indicator, when determining the location of a given place and its related lifestyles, that is, the social and cultural activities of the inhabitants that characterize the spatial identity of that place. That which remains between "urban" and "rural" can be split into smaller units (sub-urban, semi-urban, semi-rural etc.) in what is often called the urban–rural continuum [23–25]. Based on these observations, here we define urban–rural not as a dichotomy, but as a continuum consisting of locations with varied amounts of "urban" and "rural". In practice, we operationalize the continuum on the basis of the number of inhabitants of spatial areas. We distinguished seven categories: cities of less than 5000; 5000–10,000; 10,000–30,000; 30,000–100,000; 100,000–250,000; 250,000–500,000 or more inhabitants. This operationalization was necessary for having a better comprehension of the rural/urban issue, which is particularly relevant not only for technology studies, but more in general also for a social policy perspective.

The article is structured as follows: after this introduction, in the next section we will discuss the notions of the urban–rural continuum and of the forms of communicative sociability and we will explain how we have operationalized them in our study. Then we will continue to show the respects in which the results of the study are expected to be of interest to various social actors and stakeholders. This third section is concluded by describing our two research questions and related hypotheses. In the fourth section we will illustrate the sample and the method applied. After this, we will move on to present our main results, which will be discussed in the last section where final remarks and suggestions for future research will conclude the article.

2. The urban-rural continuum and the forms of communicative sociability

The depopulation of rural and peripheral areas conjures up an image of social opacity, which may be compensated for by pursuing policies of social inclusion through communication technologies [26,27]. In addition, the social and technological problems of rural areas are heterogeneous and they vary between countries. The rural is no longer one distinctive, ideal type of community. There are multiple "ruralities" (like "urbanities"), and the way of using the mobile phone is dependent upon whichever dimension of rural one experiences. In this study we would go beyond the urban–rural dichotomy in order to see whether the equalization of the mobile phone is also confirmed when a more detailed measure of the urban–rural continuum is deployed.

Thus, the rural/urban adoption of the mobile phone should be seen as being dependent upon various socio-cultural factors, such as life situations, housing patterns and social relationships [28]. And in this connection, social and technology policies – both at the national and