

Jean Tate Hiebert

A new kind of weeding

It's getting crowded in here

Mention the word *weeding* and librarians shudder at the responsibility of discarding materials for whatever reason. Now there is a new threat in the garden, and it poses even greater problems for the reluctant librarian. Mobile phones, much like weeds, are proliferating and difficult to control in spaces once reserved for quiet reflection and study. Reactions to cell phone use in libraries vary from tolerance to extreme annoyance. Accepting this new society of perpetual contact as normative in any and all social settings, according to James B. Rule, will lead to the loss of the distinctive character of all sorts of relationships, milieux, and institutions.¹

Libraries are placed in the difficult position of choosing between accepting ringing phones and loud conversations or attempting to moderate behavior in order to preserve their distinctive function as a study and learning center.

As of April 2004, there were 162,386,335 wireless phone subscribers, and the number grows hourly.² While the majority of cell phone owners are adults, there is a growing market for 16 to 22 year olds. The younger generation rely on cell phones for personal safety (particularly while driving), financial savings, social interaction, parental contact, time management/coordination, image, and privacy management.³ A walk across most college campuses would suggest that the majority of students own and regularly use cell phones everywhere. Cell phones have

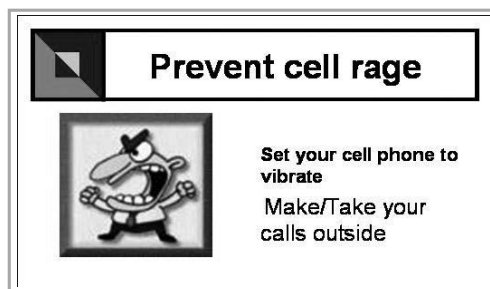
helped the shift of social interaction from private to public places, and conversely from public to private.⁴ The widespread use of this technology has led to the blurring of public and private space. A lack of public consensus on the appropriate use of cell phones in public places creates tension between those who do and those who do not respect etiquette for private behaviors in public places.

Too much noise

In 2003, East Carolina State University's Joyner Library conducted a patron satisfaction survey using LibQual. While there were

many positive comments about services, one respondent noted, "I do have one big complaint that bothers me. There is no one to enforce quiet. Every time I go into the library, people walk around

talking in outside voices and cell phones go off and it is just too noisy."⁵ Acceptable levels of noisiness vary from person to person, but the perception of annoying or unwanted noise is based on loudness, tonality, and duration, with duration including the separate aspects of impulsiveness and variability.⁶ Karl D. Kryster states that common experience indicates that impulsive sounds of high intensity seem inordinately loud and annoying. Much of the latter is often due to startle



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reactions that involve nonauditory neural and muscular systems of the body.⁷

CellManners.com characterizes that response as Cell Startle—sudden jump someone makes when his/her or someone else's phone rings.⁸ Cell startle then leads to *cell pat*, the wildly amusing occurrence when a group of people desperately pat their pockets or briefcases when a single phone rings.⁹ Unfortunately, many library patrons do not find this wildly amusing.

Options for libraries

How are libraries responding? Some have designated spaces for cell phone use, some block cell phone reception with a Faraday cage, and some ban the use of cell phones outright.¹⁰ Bans would be difficult to enforce in a large library with multiple floors primarily because of staffing issues. Libraries can not, unfortunately, expect patrons to discipline each other. One study found that the majority of the people interviewed felt that nothing could be done about inappropriate use of cell phones because it was none of their business. Most of the respondents, however, agreed or strongly agreed to a self-discipline mode, such as changing the phone from ring to vibrate. They also felt that posting public notices was acceptable, but strongly disagreed with having to surrender their phones at an entrance.¹¹ Most librarians are reluctant to pursue strong disciplinary action, but prefer to focus on managing noise in a positive, friendly manner.¹²

A solution

Near the beginning of the fall semester of 2004, the reference librarians at Joyner Library implemented a method for encourag-



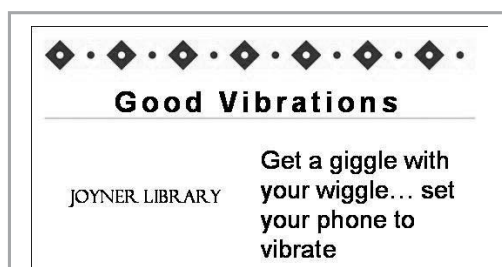
ing library patrons to discipline themselves by setting their phones to vibrate and by making and taking their calls outside the reference area. We began to issue small cards to individuals in the area whose cell phones rang. The distribution of the cards is done in a low-key manner in order to minimize the embarrassment of the patron. Several of the librarians have teenage or young adult children at home and are aware of the keen sense of humiliation children feel when singled out in a public setting. The cards are also humorous and are based on cell phone slang found at CellManners.com.

The reactions of the patrons receiving the cards have varied from mild chagrin to some eye-rolling, but all have complied. Within three weeks of distributing the cards, we began to notice that patrons now to set their phones to vibrate or turn them off altogether when entering the reference area. They also voluntarily leave the area to make and take their calls.

Joyner Library has not totally reclaimed its distinctive function as a study center, but we have made inroads into reclaiming some of the quiet we had lost. We are aware, however, that as with any weeding effort, we will begin again with each new season and each new crop of flowers our university is trying to grow.

Notes

1. James B. Rule, "From mass society to perpetual contact: Models of communication technologies in social context," in *Perpetual Contact Mobile Communication, Private Talk, Public Performance*, edited by James E. Katz and Mark A. Aakhus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 253.



2. Avi Rosenthal, Crunching cell phone numbers, *Electronic House Digital: Digital Home*, April 20, 2004, electronichouse.com/default.asp?nodeid=2000.

3. Kumiko Aoiki and Edward J. Downes, An analysis of young people's use of and attitudes toward cell phones, *Telematics and Informatics* 20 (2003): 349-64.

4. Ran Wei and Louis Leung, Blurring public and private behaviors in public space: policy challenges in the use and improper use of the cell phone, *Telematics and Informatics* 16 (1999): 11-26.

5. LibQual Survey, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, May 2003.

6. Karl D. Kryster, *The handbook of hearing and the effects of noise, physiology, psychology and public health* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994), 52.

7. *Ibid.*, 85.

8. CellManners.com, Forum Cell slang, www.cellmanners.com/forum/slang.htm.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Michael Knecht, Cell phones in the stacks, *American Libraries* 34 (June 1, 2003): 68-69.

11. Wei, 1999.

12. Charles P. Bird and Dawn D. Puglisi, Noise reduction in an undergraduate library, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 10, no. 5 (1984): 272-77. ¶¶

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opportunities for libraries to join others to accomplish what they could never afford to do alone. Of course, partnering with commercial entities is also a possibility, of which the biggest example is the recently announced digitization venture of Google and five major research libraries.³ The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, the National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation, and the Delmas Foundation are just a few of the various sources that offer libraries excellent grant opportunities.

The rewards of these partnerships, grant projects, and various innovative initiatives are great not only in providing funding for specific needs, but also for providing an important learning experience for staff. The experience helps to develop new staff skills and expertise to better support learning. As a result of these initiatives, the library cannot help but attract growing recognition from the campus community for all that it does to support the institution's mission.

Success for the future

Over the years, I have had serious doubts and worries about the sustainability of college and university libraries in the complex hybrid environment. However, as I recently reflected on

all the accomplishments of the last decade and the resourcefulness of librarians, I find myself feeling somewhat more confident about the future. Remarkably, librarians have found ways to address many needs and challenges. In looking towards the future, I believe that library staff members as a whole need to be actively involved in discussions and encouraged to think creatively about how the library's role will be evolving in the future and what impact this has on needed resources. Creativity and innovation are key elements in the library's success in years to come. It is my belief that librarians will not only find ways to meet the needs and challenges of the hybrid library, but also will define and create an exciting, new interactive learning environment with a range of rich resources readily accessible to faculty and student users.

Notes

1. National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, *Measuring up 2004: The National report card on higher education*, San Jose, California, 2004.

2. The number can actually vary from year-to-year depending on the length of the student work schedules, covering either the whole academic year or two semesters.

3. Harvard University, the New York Public Library, Oxford University, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan are the five institutions working with Google. ¶¶