



# The Next New Thing Is Here

JEFF GRALNICK

*The last decade's accelerated development of new media and technologies is not over. The next wave of change is centered in the palm of your hand. Delivery of video via cell phones is the newest leap in information technologies, and it has the potential to shake up society in unpredictable ways.*

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Photo montage: The ubiquitous cell phone already has had a significant impact on daily life, and third-generation phones (3Gs) are taking off in new directions. (All photographs from AP/Wide World Photos)

As an industry, the Internet has been driven by the search for and discovery of “the next new thing,” and once again a technological leap has produced it. The explosion of mobile bandwidth combined with new telephone technologies has given us cell phones that take and transmit pictures and that are going to be both “game” and world-changers.

Do you want to know what cell phone video is going to mean? Try these statistics on for size:

- By 2010, global shipment of new cell phones will reach just over 1 billion; 87 percent of those will be video capable.<sup>1</sup>
- By 2010, 228 billion images (still and moving pictures) will be transmitted by cell phone. That's more than will be taken by all other devices combined.<sup>2</sup>
- By 2009, China alone will have 116 million video-capable cell phones.<sup>3</sup>
- By 2008, 125 million people will be watching live television on cell phone handsets.<sup>4</sup>

- Consumption of video on laptops and PCs has grown from 900,000 streams and downloads in 2000 to 14.2 billion in 2004. Expectations are those numbers will double and redouble in the next two years.<sup>5</sup>

This is just the beginning. Third-generation cell phones, the so-called 3Gs, are just beginning to explode across the global communications landscape, flowing from east to west out of Japan and Korea. In these countries, 3G networks were built out first and fastest because mobile access to bandwidth was recognized as the business model key to the communications future. It is no accident that the watchword of SK Telecom, Korea's leading mobile communications company, is "broadband in your hand."

In Korea, the answer to the question—Will people throw away their relatively new and pricey second generation (2G) phones to upgrade to 3G?—clearly appears to be "yes," with migration from 2G to 3G there running at 74 percent in the first quarter of 2005.

While in Asia and Europe 3G is a "new thing" that has arrived, it's just arriving in North America. There, the build out of high-speed wireless networks has lagged and is at the barest of beginning points.

Anecdotal evidence, which is all that is available because actual numbers are being suppressed for what are called "competitive reasons," suggests that cell phone video consumption is "high," although the number of video-capable handsets in use in the United States has just passed the 1 million mark. Compare that with the number above for China or the 76 million said to be in use in India, and it is clear how far the United States still has to go in this area.

This adds up to an ongoing global explosion of access to news, information, and entertainment content in an unwired world unseen in my view since a little company in Japan called Tokyo Tsushin Kogyo Ltd. introduced the transistor radio in 1954. Who, you ask? Today it's called Sony.

The transistorized radio essentially put the world into everybody's shirt pocket or purse. Where you were, so was the news and all forms of entertainment. You could now be in touch with your world all the time. So-called portable radio was the spur for what we know today as "all news radio," and it made "top 40" music part of everyday culture.

What the transistor radio did for audio, the cell phone is doing for video as both a "third screen" for viewing and also the mechanism for sending video material out to other third screens. And that will change forever—yes, forever—the way global societies can and will communicate.

Look at just some of what has happened or is being planned:

- News video is already being provided by cell phones. Two years ago, ITN in London trumpeted the fact that it beat its competition with coverage of a London fire provided by a cell phone user. Similarly, in Chicago in 2005, WBBM scored a news beat with cell phone video of another fire. And those are just "messenger" events in new news coverage by cell-ographers.
- Cable news networks such as CNBC and MSNBC and Fox are already being distributed live on cell phones in the United States. Live reporting by cell phone will follow.

- And what about non-news? At a Media Center new media/wireless conference in Los Angeles in May 2005, Lucy Hood, Newscorps' senior vice president for mobile, sketched out near-term plans for five channels of television for cell phone consumption that would include news, sports, and entertainment.
- Similarly, in February 2006, Richard Branson's Virgin Mobile announced at the 3G conference in Barcelona plans to start selling handsets equipped to receive BT



Photo montage: Not so long ago, the camera phone was an exciting innovation. Today, cell phones are able to receive streaming video and run computers from afar, while devices for viewing movies and video games fit in the palm of your hand. (All photographs from AP/WideWorld Photos)

Group digital television content with a single click.

Put all of this together and it adds up to the kind of omen a very smart man I once worked with would warn about when he perceived a coming trend or event that demanded attention: “There’s a cloud,” he would say, “out there on the horizon that’s no bigger than a man’s hand right now.” Small now, he was suggesting, but watch out when it gets here. That is exactly what cell phone video represents—a coming cloud ready to burst over the communications landscape. What will the world be like when it does? Listen to several experts:

At the Barcelona conference where Virgin made its announcement, T-Mobile Chief Executive Rene Obermann predicted that “mobile will progressively become the primary personal access to the Internet.”

Sree Sreenivasan, who directs the New Media Department at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and is a regular and respected commentator on the Internet, sees a world that will be made both “exciting and scary,” where there is access to “video of things we haven’t seen properly [or ever] before.” He cites the horrific Paris Concorde crash in 2000 as an example. “Instead of just a couple of grainy photos, we’ll get high-resolution video from ... hundreds or millions ... ready to whip out their [cell phone] cameras and point them at every perceived event.” It’s a world of instant reporting by a universe of citizen journalists who are empowered by and armed with nothing more than cell phones.

That’s the exciting part, but Sreenivasan also sees a significant downside. He points to a Web site like <http://www.hollabacknycblogspot.com>, “where alleged street harassers are photographed and put online. “Imagine,” he says, “what every aggrieved man or woman can do with every perceived insult, harassment, and threat with these [cell phone] cameras.”

### It’s Worth Thinking About

Adam Clayton Powell III, director of the University of Southern California’s Integrated Media Systems Center, projects a world in which cell phones begin providing the opportunity for truly merged communicating.

“It is clear,” he told me, “that people want video wherever they are. And in a few years, video IM [instant messaging] no doubt will coexist on cell phones with [programs like] the NBC Nightly News and people will be toggling back and forth between the broadcast and video IM to chat with friends about the news and the newscast.” In this merged world, he wonders “whether those users

will still be called ‘viewers’ and the programs they watch will still be called ‘television.’”

How fast is this happening and how do we know it is happening?

Reuben Abraham, a sixth-year Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University in New York City who has done work for the Columbia Institute for Tele-Information, is convinced that while doing research in India he found the answer. “I watched fishermen come in from a day on the sea,” he told me, “and they were watching videos and news on their cell phones. So when it is already happening in parts of the economic spectrum where you would least expect it, you know it is exploding.”

What I think Abraham also saw may be the most important byproduct of this new technology—the creation of the true and instant global village. When contracts are being let for high-speed 3G networks all over Africa, including a closed society like Libya’s, and when impoverished and undereducated fishermen on the Indian Ocean are dialing into and seeing the world, something remarkable is happening.

Fostering global communication and understanding may not have been the intention of the techies who created 3G cell technology, but, as an unintended consequence, it is what makes this “next new thing” not a bad thing at all. ■

1. InfoTrends, January 2006
2. InfoTrends, January 2006
3. W2Fpri, Research, April 6, 2005
4. MediaCenter Conference, May, 2005
5. AccuStream imedia Research, 2005

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*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*



### VIDEOBLOGS ONLINE

In “Family,” Michael McIntee remembers his father’s life and stories in a discovery of the importance of family history. It is from the videoblog site *Minnesota Stories* [<http://mnstories.com>], where viewers are invited to share their lives with an online audience, creating “an evolving showcase for local citizen media.” Used by permission.

[<http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itgic/0306/ijgel/ijge0306.htm>]