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MAGAZINE

Consensual Interruptions

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By JASCHA HOFFMAN

(NYT) 429 words

Published: December 11, 2005

The problem is all too familiar: You're chatting with a group of people when someone's cellphone goes off, interrupting the conversation. What makes the intrusion irritating isn't so much

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the call itself -- the caller has no way of knowing if he has chosen a good time to cut in. It's that the group as a whole doesn't have any say in the matter. Until now.

Stefan Marti, a graduate of the M.I.T. Media Laboratory, who now works for Samsung, has devised a system that silently surveys the members of the group about whether accepting an incoming phone call would be appropriate. Then it permits the call to go through only if the group agrees unanimously -- thus creating a more consensual sort of interruption.

The system, it must be said, is highly elaborate. It begins with a special electronic-badge or -necklace device that you and everyone else you might be conversing with must wear. Your badge can tell who is in conversation with you by comparing your speech patterns with those of people nearby. (Anyone within a few feet of you who is not talking at the same time you are is assumed to be part of your conversation.)

Each badge is also in wireless contact with your cellphone and a special ring that you wear on your finger. When a caller tries you on your cellphone, all the finger rings of the people in your conversation silently vibrate -- a sort of pre-ring announcing to the group the caller's intention to butt in. If anyone in the group wants to veto the call, he can do so by simply touching his ring, and the would-be call is redirected to voice mail. If no one opts to veto, the call goes through, the phone rings and the conversation is interrupted.

Having solved the problem of when phone calls should interrupt us, Marti is now working on how they should do so. Inspired by the observation that the best interruptions are subtle and nonverbal but still somewhat public, he has designed an

animatronic squirrel that perches on your shoulder and screens your calls. Instead of your phone ringing, the squirrel simply wakes and begins to blink. Jascha Hoffman

Drawing: Consensual Interruptions

1. A call comes in on your cellphone.
2. Others' finger rings vibrate.
3. If someone doesn't want you to answer the phone, he can veto the call by touching the ring, and you won't get to talk. (Drawing by ISM)

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