



A Prison Cell

Engineers tend to be conservative in practice, but radical in adopting new technologies. Given that cellular telecommunication has advanced rapidly in the last decade, we should be racing to try the newest phones with the latest and greatest features. And maybe my younger colleagues are doing so, but for myself I have come to view cell phones with a jaundiced eye.

Being of a certain age, I have used AT&T for long distance forever. At the time that I finally decided to get cell phones for our family, we chose AT&T wireless. Three years later AT&T merged into Cingular, which is going to resurrect AT&T. Still, the goofiness of the situation is that in wireless vernacular we are “migrating” our service from AT&T to Cingular. Our old Nokia phones employed a technology that is being phased out, so we were both pushed by a \$5 per month charge that would have been tacked onto our bill and pulled by smaller, more advanced phones.

Our family does not use cell phones to pass the time of day chatting with friends or other family members. If we need to talk we either pick up our home phone and call locally or we hook up the iSight cameras on our Macs and visit by video. We use cell phones to solve problems such as finding each other when we’re on errands, consulting on something when out shopping, or sorting out airport meetings. When my wife Helen returns from the Farmers’ Market, she rings me on the cell to tell me there are groceries to haul in. This turns out to be the most efficient way to reach me when I am catercorner across the house from the garage. On one occasion, my son Patrick, while driving back from a small town east of Atlanta, got caught in a traffic jam and called me with his location. I got on

the Web and used online maps and Department of Transportation information to direct him along back roads to an expressway entrance beyond the jam. Problem solving.

In the wireless store, all of those bright, shiny, new handsets look inviting. Color screen, digital camera, extended coverage. It’s almost too much to contemplate. So you take them home, charge them up...and descend into “cell hell” or perhaps more appropriately “sell hell.” Operations that had been easy with our heavy, antiquated Nokias became complex and confusing with our featherweight Samsungs. Any attempt to initiate a call, unless carefully thought out, can result in additional charges being added to your monthly bill. Open the phone and hit the button with the bright Cingular icon and you will be immediately transported to a browser with additional costs. For some, this may be attractive, but the idea of browsing in a cell phone window has as much attraction to me as walking around with my eyes dilated. Pick the phone up with a natural motion and the meter starts ticking as the PTT (Push To Talk) button is depressed. To avoid this you have to handle the phone as if you were picking up a dead rat. (I put some Elmer’s glue around the edge of the button to immobilize it.)

Once the cover is flipped open and you have evaded the browser, the initial menu is presented as a confusing set of overlapping animated icons. The first one, to nobody’s surprise, is the Cingular Mall, where you can buy ring tones, games, graphics, multimedia, and applications for your new toy. There is no selection list. Instead you must cycle through those dithering icons until you find the needed menu. Once there, more choices can be made after you drill down two more levels. Cell phones like this, along with most TV and DVD remotes and the front panel of any piece of electronics, confine and bewilder users.

The intrusiveness and complexity of today’s device interfaces defeat even the most enthusiastic electronics lover. Despite glitzier case designs and additional functions, the limiting factor for cell phones has become the user interface. One of the few devices that goes against this ergonomic grain is the iPod. By carefully devising decision trees and graphic selection strategies, Apple permits the user to operate the portable music player mostly by intuition. I’ve paid for my cell phone and I’m on the hook to Cingular for two years, but if Apple produces a phone with an interface design similar to the iPod, I’ll buy one so I can break out of my prison cell.

Donald C. O’Shea
Editor