



Over Information

Mobiles, music players and PDA's have freed up the way we communicate and entertain ourselves, but now we're travelling around with absolutely truckloads of information. [Judy Friedlander](#) looks at just how information heavy we've become.



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It's official: Australians are "heavy". This isn't referring to our food-induced state. The "heavy" in this case relates to our personal digital consumption.

The typical gadget-crazy person is now carrying around massive amounts of information. Forget the old address book and paper diary; today we're storing text messages, emails, images, music and more on our mobiles, MP3 players, organizers and cameras.

Australians who own a run-of-the-mill mobile phone, organizer and the "less heavy" iPod Shuffle, for example, are carrying around 600MB to 1GB of data - roughly the equivalent of a pick-up truck filled with paper according to an estimate by Professor Ray Williams from the California Institute of Technology. Many of us are literally walking around with truckloads of information!

According to a study by Toshiba International, the amount of data that can be stored by individuals has grown by 400 percent in the last three years, while the cost for every gigabyte has fallen by 80 percent.

The Toshiba study polled 200 consumers in the United Kingdom and 200 in Germany to find out about the data they were storing in a variety of devices such as mobile phones, PDAs and MP3 players.

The study indicated mobile phones were the most used devices (text messages and images being most commonly stored) and that 60 percent of the consumers kept 1,000 to 2,000 music files on their MP3 players. That's about 5GB or 5 pick-up trucks!

The weight of freedom

While our mobile devices may be carrying around a lot of information, they've helped to set us free from the anchored computer. We can now contact anyone, anytime; capture their image and listen to music while we wait.



Gadget crazy! These days a wealth of information is stored on mobiles, PDAs and portable storage devices such as the iPod. Image: Reuters

"There's no doubt about it; mobile devices take the pressure off," says Dr Toni Robertson, of the Faculty of Information Technology at the University of Technology, Sydney. "People don't have to plan as much before they go out. They simply pick up their devices."

Peter Higgs, from Queensland University of Technology, says there are many benefits to the new consumer devices - more immediate contact which helps provide security and safety, greater access to knowledge, an ability to record more easily and an ability to personalize your music tastes. However, he says, there are qualifiers: "People can get access to your secrets, you can lose valuable information if you don't back up and there is much less down-time now, less reflective time."



What you want - when you want it. But who else has access to your information?

Image: iStockfoto

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Phones & Cameras

With the widespread introduction of 3G mobile technology this year, mobile phones are set to become really serious digital storage devices. Third generation technology supports high-speed data capacities (2MB) and applications such as full-motion video, conferencing and full internet access - a whole new range of information for us to carry around.

Mobiles

- The majority of mobile phone users keep between 10 and 40 text messages at any one time.
- According to the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA), there are an estimated 16.5 million mobile phone subscribers in Australia.
- Australia's mobile penetration rate is now approximately 85 percent. An AMTA report indicates that in 2003, Europe had an average mobile penetration rate of 83 percent with Germany and the United Kingdom at the top end of the scale.
- According to Nick Mann of Motorola Mobile Devices, 60 percent of their Australian mobile phone users would use the camera on their phones and approximately 15 percent are using their phone to play music on the MP3 player with removable memory. And, of course, text is challenging voice as the preferred modus operandi.

"Communication has been a major driver of the new technologies," says Dr Robertson, "A US study found that the most common use of video phones was for showing shopping purchases and videos of pets."

Our mobile phone cameras are typically storing over 30 images, although very few mobile phones images are printed as the quality is poor on a 1 mega-pixel (MP) phone camera. However, 3MP phone cameras are now available and 5MP are around the corner.

The ease with which we now take and store images is changing our attitude towards photos. Not so long ago, "captured images" as photos were precious commodities. Now the digital versions are fleeting and ephemeral. Photo albums are becoming virtual.

Cameras

- In 2005, approximately 40 percent of Australian households will have digital cameras.
- Kodak Australia's Brian Finch says that in 2004, 53 billion digital images were captured world-wide. It's estimated that in 2007 that number will climb to 172 billion.
- While the majority of these images are printed at a retail outlet, 9.1 billion of the 53 billion were printed at home.



Most photos taken by video phone cameras are not printed despite the taking and storage of photos being on the increase. Image: Reuters

Listen to the music

US technology writer, Eric Danton, believes that digital players have become more popular as a reaction against involuntary exposure to someone else's taste - that is, music force-fed to us in cafes, shopping centres and elevators. "It gives us a choice: their music or ours", he says.

MP3 Players

- According to industrysearch.com, Apple has sold more than 10 million iPods internationally since their debut in 2001. The company holds 65 percent of the hard drive-based portable music player market.
- 60 percent of people polled by Toshiba kept 1,000 to 2,000 music files on their devices. That's about 5GB.

There is a serious down side to switching off from extraneous noises. The Ambulance Service of NSW says that "sound-proofing" our lives means that emergency vehicles often cannot be heard by people with headphones in their ears or when in cars with radios blaring.

So organized

The personal digital assistant (PDA) is the Filofax of the Noughties. With the addition of various wireless technologies, the PDA has become both a planner and a communications device.

The latest technology combines phone, email, organizer, messaging, web access, MP3 player and camera (including video) functions.

PDAs

- Since 2002, the number of hand-held devices in Australia has grown from approximately 115,350 and is expected to number around 405,000 this year (International Data Corporation (Australia) (IDC) data).
- Early PDAs, around 1996, stored 256KB of total memory. Today's glossy model can take 256MB.

Data sources: Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association (AMTA), Motorola Australia, Toshiba International, Toshiba Australia, Kodak Australasia, industrysearch.com, Apple Australia, International Data Corporation (Australia).

PalmOne's Lesley McKnight says that there are over 20,000 software applications which can be used with palmOne's handheld devices.

"Mobility is a core part... to empower people with choice of a device," she said. "Users want to have access to their personal and business information no matter where they are."

Thanks for the extra memories?

Is our heaviness the muscular variety, with flexibility thrown in? Or, are we chewing the fat?

No-one would ever want to go back to the dark ages of fixed phones, big bulky cameras, tinny radios and a ton of sound system.

However, in our efforts to "byte" off more and more, we need to digest and stream-line. To remember that we are the users and not the used.

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