

Life & times

All the good word's on Skype

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FAST LIVING



There has been a slew of new mobile phones released recently, including new models from Nokia, and notably from Sony Eriksson (the Sony Walkman W205).

They have appealing bells and whistles, and the new Sony in particular is at a competitive price. But if you want my advice, buy none of them. Well, at least not yet.

A few weeks ago, Skype Mobile was launched. Skype is the VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) program that lets you make a phone call over the internet using your broadband connection. It's a simple little program that runs on any PC – calls to other Skype users are free and calls to landlines and mobiles are very cheap. You can even video call others on Skype: fun for the kids and grandparents especially. Skype has 405 million registered users and is a satisfying way to circumvent the big telcos' bullish charging for long-distance and mobile calls.

In early April, Skype became the biggest single provider of cross border, or international, calls – though this was only at 8 per cent of all traffic. So why don't more people use Skype? One reason might be that in the past you needed to be at your computer to use it, but no longer.

Now, you can connect to any WiFi network, dial up a contact using Skype Mobile and chat away for little more than the cost of the broadband use.

You can use Skype Mobile on a number of mobile phones – check the Skype site (www.skype.com) for compatible models. But now there is another way, one that doesn't even use a Mobile, and this is where my iPod Touch comes in. I've had the Touch for almost six months, and it's become essential. Not only is it great as an MP3 player and useful to watch the odd video on, it's also my



notepad for occasional thoughts and whimsies, my digital diary (I can sync my work calendar through Entourage and iCal), has a couple of cool games to keep the kids happy at the local cafe and is a very capable email and internet browser, as long as there is a WiFi network nearby. An aside: if you have WiFi in your home, for goodness sake, put password protection on it. Walking down my street from the bus stop, five different WiFi signals appear on my iPod, three of which are not protected, so I could, if I wasn't honest, jump on and surf to my heart's content.

But hijacking someone else's network aside, there are plenty of cheap

or sometimes free WiFi hotspots around (a certain restaurant chain with a big M outside recently announced free WiFi for all its customers) that enable you to jump on the net with your Touch, Sony or other mobiles. Speeds can vary.

You can see where this is going, because the Touch has WiFi and accepts voice input, it can use Skype Mobile. But how good is this in the real world. Well, there's nothing like a field test, so I bought myself a pair of earphones with built-in microphone and remote. (Not all iPod models can accept voice input, so check this out before spending any money.) Once equipped, I found a

Screen belief: The iPod Touch – it's great as an MP3 player, useful to watch the odd video on, a notepad and digital diary, has a couple of cool games to keep the kids happy and is a very capable email and internet browser.

cheap WiFi network in the city, logged in and Skyped a landline.

It was extremely easy, simply dialling from a keypad inside Skype or tapping one of my contacts with a stored phone number, and off the program went, routing my call over the internet. Connection took about 10 seconds, but the call wasn't crystal clear. There was a bit of an echo, though the person I called said it was clear at theirs. The quality of the audio also varied a little during the call as I moved around – fluctuating on the WiFi signal is my guess.

But it was no worse than some mobile calls I've had, and the call, including the cost of the landline connection and WiFi charge, cost me about 8c a minute. How does this compare with your mobile phone charges? Mine is about 78c on a prepaid plan. As an alternative to a basic mobile phone call it had a lot of appeal, and if you compare international calls on Skype with mobile phone rates for the same, you might see even more appeal.

Skype works on a variety of devices, but there is a caveat. Many phone companies have banned Skype except via WiFi, so even if you have a mobile with an internet plan, you won't necessarily be able to Skype. In Germany, T Mobile has gone further and banned the use of Skype altogether. This sort of reaction by mobile phone companies is hardly surprising; if calling over the internet becomes widespread, they stand to lose millions in revenue.

Something about all this seems only too familiar. I have written a number of columns recently about parts of the entertainment or communications industry fighting battles against new technology, such as the big record companies fighting file sharing, or mobile phone companies still charging huge rates for mobile data plans. In the end the mobile phone carriers, like the music or film industry may be fighting a losing battle. Even before the official launch of Skype Mobile, plenty of hacks would let you do the same on your iPhone. It seems it's only a matter of time until the practice becomes almost universal.

Up, up and away in high-flying thrills of earthly take-off

SLOW LIVING



There is nothing slow about 400 tonnes of metallic fuselage careering down a runway and flinging itself away from our gravity-stricken terra firma – but the moment of take-off is worth savouring.

How deep can our attachment to this Earth run? Just as the knowledge of take-off speed cannot be refuted, a slow motion of what we might call Earth memory ironically kicks in as the plane heads skywards. It's akin to the idea of falling from a great height, out of the sky, and sensing death

before impact – when supposedly one's whole life-history flashes past. The take-off moment opposes such a fall to the Earth and yet the ground itself appears to pull at us, as if screaming out and clutching at our racing heels.

"Taking off" also serves as a language platform: it is the launch space for an imagined or likely occurrence (commonly associated with a career move or a journey with futures in mind). When you're on a plane the take-off plays out between physical experiences (vibration, thrusting engines, and their gut-flattening counterparts – velocity and trajectory) and the metaphysical experience of leaving the planet.

While sitting in the fake leather

seat, two small sets of wheels squeal frantically at the tarmac, providing the last point of earthly contact. As our stomachs churn, we are subject to a force of physics that heads us to outer space. Does this sudden relationship of "nearness" to the stars stir our attachment to Earth?

Certainly, this is my experience. If asked to pick an element – air, water, earth or fire – my affinity would lie squarely with earth. Ocean waves scare me, while fire and air are mercurial things that unsettle my need for a steady body temperature.

Earth fondness allows the appreciation of leaving something more than just the ground, when take-off occurs. The speedy removal of "self-from-planet" disrupts the magnetic



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pull we're so used to. The moment of plane(tary) take-off is dogmatically sky and air-bound, but the sky does not hold us. The higher into it, the less support the sky provides; it's not a home for weight, air or warmth.

The take-off provides a set of thrills – this intensity busts open sensory perceptions. Before we have even left the runway, a feeling of ancient belonging tunes us into our past. The emotion of take-off slows the immediate knowledge of this unidirectional movement; simultaneously modern flight technology forces our escape into the future.

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