

Book Review: Negotiating Control: Organizations and Mobile Communication by Keri K. Stephens

Samuel B. Hoff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hoff, Samuel B. () "Book Review: Negotiating Control: Organizations and Mobile Communication by Keri K. Stephens," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Stephens, Keri K., *Negotiating Control: Organizations and Mobile Communication*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 296 pages. Hardcover, \$69.57.

The methods by which business employees adopt and utilize mobile communication is the topic of this timely study. Motivated by training in organizational communication, Keri Stephens has written this book “with the hope that people from different backgrounds—scholars, human resource (HR) managers, information systems (IS) professionals, and students—can all understand and learn from the stories and data analyzed here” (p. 5). The material is examined from three distinct perspectives, organizational, power, and human communication. The author, an associate professor of communications studies at the University of Texas at Austin, serves as associate editor of *Management Communication Quarterly*.

The text contains twelve chapters and two appendices. The initial two chapters furnish background on utilization of cell phones as business tools. Stevens observes that just as cell phone access exploded in the first decade of the new century, so did expectations about their use at work. However, managers soon “faced some difficult decisions about how to allocate and regulate their use” (p. 29).

Across the next seven chapters, Stevens depicts how different workers cope with formal and informal rules regarding mobile phone usage. Though she identifies a fourth perspective of analysis—concertive—which gives worker team some discretion over mobile phone policy, this approach nonetheless is driven by overlapping organizational goals. When leaders fail to establish explicit mobile phone rules, employees tend to adhere to the governing norms. Among manual workers, complaints about supervisors’ implementation of mobile phone rules ranged from lack of access and the need to improve computer literacy to perceived inconsistent

interpretation of procedures. The policy of bring-your-own-device to work (BYOD) is assessed as it pertains to new college graduates, hospital workers, and customer-facing occupations.

Chapters 10 through 12 attempt to synthesize earlier findings. Among key conclusions about mobile phone use at work are: 1) people are not always reachable; 2) it is not always acceptable to use or be seen using a mobile device at work; 3) types of control surrendering mobile use vary. Stephens proposes self-discipline and human-to-human communication as broad recommendations for improvement, while focusing on self-critiques by individuals and increased training by human resource staff as specific suggestions. Although formulating a multilevel model of mobile communication control, she reminds us that challenges remain due to the dynamic and unpredictable nature of such interaction.

Though relatively recent, there is a record of research linking mobile devices with work and life in general. In their 2012 study, Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind examine how business leaders can alter an organization's culture to ensure effective communication. Mark Schaefer's 2018 book offers a contemporary social media strategy for organizations. More broadly, Lee Humphreys' 2018 book probes how social media users create mediated memories by documenting mundane events. The common thread in all of these studies is the power and potential of modern technology.

There are both structural and substantive shortcomings in Stephens' study. Both in the table of contents and chapters, the text is divided into overly numerous subsections. One of the reasons for this trend is the inclusion of multiple case studies within each chapter. Reducing the latter examples will result in more focused presentation without losing quality.

Some chapters in the book do a better job than others in meshing the author's research findings with existing studies in the field of mobile communication. In particular, information

related in Chapters 7 and 11 is especially critical to the understanding how mobile communications control can be overcome.

Despite its unconventional nature, the author should be commended for including several types of data in this book, including that emanating from interviews, focus groups, and surveys. The irregular, inconsistent number of participants in these respective studies is offset by the diversity of their background.

Ultimately, the idiosyncratic nature of human communication is not easily amenable to simple modeling, so the utility of Stephens' multilevel model of mobile communication control is likely limited. That does not mitigate the creativity by which she approached the topic. Clearly, she achieved her goal of inspiring "scholars to tackle new research that will continue developing our understanding of the ongoing negotiation of mobile communication" (p. 229).

References:

- Groysberg, Boris. 2012. *Talk, Inc.: How Trusted Leaders Use Conversation to Power Their Organizations*. Brighton, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Humphreys, Lee. 2018. *The Qualified Self: Social Media and the Accounting of Everyday Life*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schaefer, Mark. 2018. *Social Media Explained: Untangling the World's Most Misunderstood Business Trends*, 2nd edition. Self: Mark W. Schaefer.

Samuel B. Hoff
George Washington Distinguished Professor of History and Political Science
Delaware State University
Dover, DE