

Wireless messaging is still 'taking off' in America

BlackBerry is not a pie filling, but SMS remains unknown

Last week, a friend sent me the following message:

ERIC IM SENDING THIS E-MAIL FROM MY CELL LET ME KNOW IF IT WORK THANX

He is by no means the only American in awe of mobile phones that can exchange text messages. At some point in the past

decade, the country that invented both cellular phones and electronic mail lost the connection between the two. SMS and GSM are here, but hardly

anybody's heard of them. We don't text, at least not yet. We use mobile phones to talk. The wireless messaging market here is still a jumble of acronyms. At least two million Americans use some form of wireless e-mail, but they're divided into several incompatible camps that use different networks, frequencies and protocols. All they have in common is their use of Internet-style addresses. At least they all agree on that.

Celebrity messaging

Here in New York City, wireless messaging has even taken on class distinctions, with businessmen preferring Research in Motion's BlackBerry technology, and consumers preferring Motorola's two-way pagers.

BlackBerry users include Al Gore, Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Ben Affleck, and Matt Damon. Pamela Anderson occasionally uses a BlackBerry in her 'VIP' television series. All the presenters at the 2002 Grammy Awards walked away with BlackBerry units in their goodie bags. The brokers at Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs use their BlackBerry units to read their Notes and Exchange messages.

The A list for Motorola's two-way pagers – the Talkabout T900, the PageWriter, and the Timeport – includes TV presenters Star Jones and Carson Daly, basketball player Shaquille O'Neal, and hip hop music mogul Russell Simmons. It's a big hit

with rappers. The players in the Def Jam Vendetta video game get text messages on their pagers between bouts. At the Source Hip

Hop Music Awards in August 2000, the winners' names were beamed to the podium via a Motorola Timeport P935 instead of an envelope. Motorola's units appeared on the hips of the dancers in an Usher music video. Rapper Jay-Z wrote about his pager in the song: 'I Just Wanna Love U (Give it 2 Me)':

*Only way to roll, Jigga and two ladies,
I'm too cold,
Motorola two-way page me,
C'mon!*

In round numbers, there are roughly a million-plus Motorola two-way and 900,000 BlackBerry users in the US. An undetermined percentage of the country's 137 million other cellular users also use SMS and/or wireless e-mail or instant messaging services, something like 10% to 20% (my friend now among them).

EEMA's GSM spy story

The first time I heard the acronym GSM, I assumed it stood for something in French, like CCITT or SITA. That would have been in June 1994 at EEMA's Annual Conference in Stockholm, when a man I knew from Finland who shall remain



nameless showed me how to exchange e-mail using a laptop and a Nokia GSM phone. He showed me how to change carriers, how to change languages, and how to remove the SIM card and put it in another phone, (that was also my first glimpse of a smart card, but that's another story).

Having often spent more for my modem usage than my room at hotels, I paid close attention to his tale. My Finnish friend said Europe had already standardised on GSM, but the American Government had objected to the strength of its encryption. The problem, he said, was that GSM's A5/1 over-the-air privacy algorithm was too strong for the US National Security Agency to casually crack. The NSA requested that the standards-makers make secret-but-deliberate security compromises to the keys. Supposedly, they were denied. So they allegedly retaliated by delaying GSM's acceptance in the US. My Finnish friend said while the rest of the world standardised on GSM, the

American wireless e-mail market would end up tangled in a mess of its own making.

Now this was 1994, before even Web browser encryption was much of an issue, so this part of the story didn't mean much to me then. In fact it sounded like a Cold

War spy novel, best set in Vienna in the 1960s. But that acronym stuck with me: GSM.

Back in America, McCaw Cellular (later AT&T Wireless) backed the CDPD standard, and others backed Ericsson's Mobitex technology, IBM's DataTAC, Qualcomm's CDMA, Motorola's



At some point in the past decade, the country that invented both cellular phones and electronic mail lost the connection between the two

ReFLEX, or Nextel's iDEN, I realised how right he was about the acronyms.

American regulators created a competition in the 1990s that cost us dearly. Even if the NSA story is completely false, the truth is that most American cellular customers are just now finding out their phones can exchange SMS and short Internet e-mail/instant messages. It's that new.

Thanks to my Stockholm debriefing, I knew in late 1995, when a company called OmniPoint Communications launched a GSM service in New York, that I should sign up. I've also tested numerous wireless messaging gadgets over the years for my columns, and I have a shelf full of cast-offs as a result. But my SMS and wireless e-mail address has been the same for 71/2 years: 9179150730. Send me a message at <http://www.t-mobile.com/messaging/>

most American cellular customers are just now finding out their phones can exchange SMS and short Internet e-mail/instant messages

That's a German URL

Notice the T-Mobile Web address. OmniPoint, my original GSM carrier, was bought by VoiceStream, which then was acquired by Deutsche Telekom. My monthly bill now says T-Mobile USA Inc., and my phone is a Nokia model 5190. Every time I travel to an EEMA event, I slip my SIM card into a Philips Diga GSM phone, put my office calls on forward, and all my phone calls, SMS, and short e-mails are

automatically rerouted to me in Europe. People dial the New York number and they hear the European ring.

GSM is also used by Cingular Wireless, AT&T Wireless, and some 30 other smaller regional carriers. But even with them on board, the sad truth is that several large US cities still don't have any GSM coverage. Sprint PCS, Verizon Wireless, and other CDMA carriers still dominate the US market. The newest CDMA phones are quite sophisticated, with digital cameras, colour LCD screens, and Web browsers built in. They're the delight of the early adopters who love new gadgets.

Mobitex is not a New York DJ

Ericsson's old Mobitex networks are actually doing pretty well now, with Cingular Wireless having inherited services opened a decade ago by BellSouth and RAM Mobile Data. The most popular Mobitex devices are RIM's

BlackBerry units.

Cingular said in February that they

have 820,000 Mobitex users nationwide, up 11.5% from the year before. Cingular also said it wants BlackBerries for GSM/GPRS. Presto! RIM is now working with Nokia on BlackBerry devices for American GSM.

Another veteran network has passed down through the ages from IBM and Motorola (they called it Ardis) into the hands of Motient Corp. (they call it eLink). They sell units that look a lot like BlackBerries. However, users report that its protocol drains the batteries of eLink units at an alarming rate. Motient declared bankruptcy in January 2002, claiming 85,000 eLink wireless Internet customers.

So the story from America is that wireless messaging is taking off. Wouldn't it be ironic if, after all these years, after all this contrived competition and tangled acronyms, that we ended up picking

GSM/GPRS, just in time

for it all to be replaced by 3G?

One wouldn't mind if the soon-to-be-obsolete gadgets were a hundred dollars or less. But some of these new wireless

Windows PCs and Palms

with built-in wireless e-mail sell for US\$500 to US\$700, and some of the new BlackBerry units sell for almost as much. Tell the people who bought them that they should have waited. ■

The most popular Mobitex devices are RIM's BlackBerry units

Eric Arnum can be reached at 9179150730@voicestream.net if you have little to say or at earnum@rcn.com if you speak volumes.