If you can imagine in your mind taking a journey out among the billions of mobile phones in the world, which are being used in all sorts of interesting ways, in what is shaping up as a new social landscape, then Gerard's book can perhaps be thought of as the ‘Lonely Planet Guide’ to this fascinating expedition. It is a trusted, even indispensable companion to discovering the delicious and delightful Delis, the steamy star resorts, the avant-garde atriums and even the notorious ‘what’s on this week’ in our school-yards and on our beaches. If you thought mobiles were mundane (‘I just want to make a call’) technology, then Gerard’s extensive coverage and insightful analysis will cause you to think again.

To an industry reader Gerard’s book is different, in that it takes an intentional cultural rather than technological perspective on mobile phones and their use. It is the place of the mobile phone within society – its politics, its media, its economics, its social groupings, its usage – that is in view.

That said, his general starting point is some of the pre- and early history of ‘Producing the cell phone’, both in terms of handsets and networks. Then, jumping off from stories of Nokia and Vodafone in making the mobile a ‘cool phone’, Gerard examines in detail many of the uses with which mobiles have been associated. The ‘success’ story of SMS is covered in some detail, as is the ‘failure’ caused by the non-universal design of mobile handsets and services for people with disabilities. However, it is in the section on ‘Representing and regulating the cell phone’ that Gerard really gets down to examining the mobile as a cultural object of identity and intimacy through highly publicised incidents of ‘mobile panics’, phone-tapping and text-romancing. The final part of the book looks specifically at how mobiles are converging with media spaces, both as a way of consuming (multi-media, Internet and TV) and producing and disseminating media (text, audio, pictures and short videos; MMS, email and moblogging).

While Gerard’s book is aimed at students of culture and media, are there any lessons in it for designers, technologists and marketers? Interestingly, any links between successful, popular technologies and culture appear tenuous. For example, ‘the rise of SMS (or resistance to it, or simply lack of interest) is variable across cultures’ – this despite Nokia’s generally successful ‘contextual inquiry’ approach to designing for specific markets. On the other hand, there are fundamental and ongoing lessons for designers about cultural inclusion based on accessibility and ‘universal design’ for people with disabilities. Yet, here again, success through addressing culture is never guaranteed. What may be a well-designed handset for the Blind, the Owasys phone, may yet fail due a whole range of other factors such as cost, features, technical approvals and consumer preferences for other competing alternative products.

Gerard’s final question relates to ‘participation’ (aka democracy) and whether the change from public telecommunications utilities to private competitive corporations will provide enough ‘openness’ to allow everyone to engage in mobile culture. One view is that, as communications companies move into the media space (and vice-versa) and as mobile hardware increasingly be-
comes software and IP-based and therefore easily adaptable (cf. Apple Inc.’s iPhone), the modus operandi of media production may come to dominate: that is, it all comes down to ‘throwing spaghetti at the wall; sometimes some of it will stick’. It is perhaps in the growing number of options and opportunities provided to consumers by new mobile networks and new convergent devices that the openness that Gerard seeks may continue to grow. His final hope – ‘...to participate actively and knowingly in the opening up and shaping of such media and technology’ – reminds me of my favourite quote about technology from Lelia Green: ‘people can make a difference to their technological future if they are interested and get involved’.