

Smile, you're on the mobile

NOT since the Eighties, when yuppie diners posed with those first brick-sized portables, has a mobile phone generated such a "gotta have it" reaction. For those who thought the WAP-enabled Nokia 7110 was the pinnacle of cool, prepare yourself: the humble mobile phone is about to be turned on its head. Welcome to the world of the mobile videophone.

As you might expect, the Japanese got there first. They have been merrily eyeballing one another remotely while on the move for months, thanks to their own phone networks that provide the bandwidth capacity necessary for video. At the forefront has been communications company Kyocera; last week, we got our hands on the only pair of Kyocera videophones in the UK.

Word on the street was positive. Claire Porter, a charity worker we accosted outside Victoria station, immediately asked where she could get one. Unfortunately, the answer is Tokyo — for now at least. It's only by devilish trickery that they operate in the UK. They've been adapted to work like walkie-talkies, transmitting video as well as audio with a range of about 300 metres. The video images aren't as animated as they would be on the quicker Japanese network, as they are refreshed once every one and a half seconds, but the audio reception is clear and instantaneous.

The Kyocera visual phone is a sleek little number, with a large main display and a tiny video camera just above it that records your image. Most of the display is taken up with the image of the person you're phoning, but you can also see yourself in a small box in the bottom right corner of the screen. They're a snip at £250, though sadly that doesn't include the air fare to Japan.

WAP phones will seem ever so passé once you get your hands on a mobile videophone.

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joins the revolution

Kyocera says it is in talks with many large UK network providers as new, more advanced networks are developed.

So how long before the UK starts moving towards mobile nirvana? Well, most networks here are awaiting the unveiling of UMTS (Universal Mobile Telephone Service) to run their video-phones.

This is the Third Generation or "3G" technology that will enable the widespread use of video-enabled handsets through GPRS (General Packet Radio System), the successor to GSM (Global System for Mobiles). The bad news is that all this won't be available until 2003.

NEC, Nokia and Ericsson have all produced 3G models, while Orange too has announced its plan to make video-as-you-go a reality.

In the next week or so, it will unveil the HSCSD (High Speed Circuit Switched Data) system, which has been developed for Orange videophones as it will allow data to travel across mobile networks four times faster than it can now.

HSCSD will initially be used for corporations to gain faster access to their intranets. It will also mean considerably faster access to the internet, both for domestic users

and on the videophone itself. Although videophones to exploit HSCSD will only be available from November at the earliest, Orange is making the most of its initiative: "This will not only mean being able to make video calls wherever you are. You will be able to use the device in many more ways," according to Adrian Turner, senior product manager at Orange.

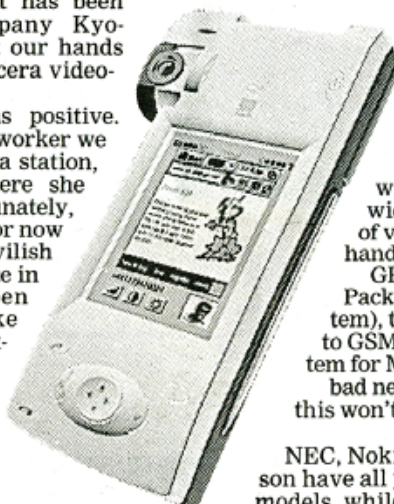
"For example, for security, for estate agents to show what a house looks like remotely — it will even have medical applications (transmitting live from the ambulance, say — before we even start talking about video postcards from the beach or watching the latest movie trailers." However, others take a more considered view about the potential impact. For schoolteachers, the already mobile menace threatens to reach unmentionable proportions in the classroom.

But Perdita Patterson, editor of What Mobile? magazine, who has seen a demonstration of an early version of the Orange phone, reckons: "The practical reality is unlikely to live up to people's expectations."

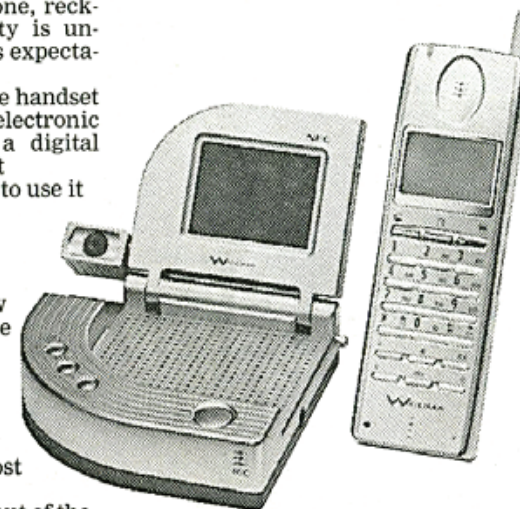
It is likely that the Orange handset will also include typical electronic organiser functions and a digital camera. "From the moment you buy it, you will be able to use it as your organiser, take pictures, browse the web, and send and receive e-mails," enthuses Adrian Turner. But we still don't know how much they will cost. In June 1999, Orange announced it would be shipping videophones for Christmas for £500. Now it may cost as much as £1,000 — and that doesn't include the extra cost of make-up, and the emotional cost of running out of the shower to take a call without reaching for a towel first.



Here's looking at you: the Kyocera VP-210 visual phone



Generation game: the Orange videophone



Future vision: the NEC videophone

£1,000 FOR A VIDEO MOBILE?

Alex Musson, web designer: "Not a chance."
Debbie Ormonde, sales director: "I would definitely buy one but not for £1,000."
Sergeant Barnard, policeman: "I'd like one, but for no more than £250. The size is an important issue."
Christian Smith, law student: "For management, this could be very useful, but I think it will be a while before it takes off."
David Jackson, doctor: "It's a lot lighter than I expected. I can't believe you can record video on this as well. For teenagers, it's a must-have."

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