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**MONITOR****Your cheating phone**

Dec 2nd 2004

From The Economist print edition

**Communications: Do mobile phones make it easier or more difficult to deceive people about your location, activities and intentions?**

LIKE many technologies, the mobile phone makes possible new kinds of deception—and new ways to catch out the dishonest. Call someone from a mobile phone, for example, and you can pretend to be anywhere. But if someone calls you, the ringing tone they hear before you answer depends on which country you are in—and may reveal your location. Hong Kong businessmen, for example, once did not dare to leave their mobile phones switched on while visiting sleazy Macau, because the change in ringing tone could betray them. After the ringing tone for Macau was changed to sound like Hong Kong's, however, they could safely leave their phones on, and roaming revenues soared.

As mobile phones become more sophisticated, the possibilities for deception—and for exposing it—are increasing. The latest handsets have high-resolution cameras and satellite positioning, which can prove embarrassing to anyone who lies about their location and is then asked to produce a picture or a satellite fix to prove it. Nemesysco, an Israeli firm, has developed voice-stress analysis software that can, it claims, turn a mobile phone into a rudimentary lie detector. And new "third generation" (3G) mobile phones support video calling, though few people are using it so far.

Jakob Nielsen, a specialist in computer interfaces, worries that all this technology has made its users too accountable. "You don't want your phone to start squealing on you," he says. "Sometimes you might want to take a call by the pool, or in your pyjamas." He need not worry: there is a constant stream of new ways to facilitate phone-based deception.

For example, Liviu Tofan and Razvan Dragomirescu, the founders of Simedra, a German mobile-services firm, wondered whether "blue screen" technology from the television and movie industries, which is used to add fake backgrounds behind presenters and actors, could be applied to mobile video-telephony. Users could then appear to be at the office while lounging on the beach.

When this proved to be too technically difficult, the pair came up with an audio version of their idea instead, called SounderCover. It allows users of certain Nokia handsets to play pre-recorded bursts of traffic noise, airport announcements or other sounds in the

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be assigned to different people in the phone's address book, and triggered when they call. But despite its slogan—"Hide behind sound, make it your alibi"—Mr Tofan says most customers use SounderCover for fun. Many create their own sounds, such as a shoot-out or a love scene, to play tricks on their friends.

Mobile-phone deception is not limited to tricking people at the other end of the line. Two services offered by American operators, Cingular's Escape-A-Date and Virgin Mobile's Rescue Ring, allow customers to prearrange a call at a given time, to enable them to get out of a disastrous dinner date or boring meeting. With Cingular's service, for example, the phone rings and a recorded voice says: "Hey, this is your Escape-A-Date call. If you're looking for an excuse, I got it. Just repeat after me, and you'll be on your way. 'Not again! Why does that always happen to you? All right, I'll be right there.' Now tell 'em that your room-mate got locked out, and you have to go let them in. Good luck!" (Never believe anyone who tries that excuse, then.)

Both fake background noises and fake emergency calls still require you to be a convincing liar, however. Some people find it difficult to lie in person. One survey, carried out by Freever, a mobile-services firm, found that 45% of Britons had lied about their whereabouts by text message, and 22% would rather text than phone when faking an illness. If you are bad at telling lies yourself, why not outsource the job to someone else?

That is the idea behind "alibi clubs", in which a group of people agree to provide fake alibis for each other. For example, the "Alibi and Excuse Club" was set up last year at SMS.ac, a mobile-chat community. It has since attracted over 6,800 members, though this correspondent's request for someone to provide an excuse to help extend his copy deadline did not produce a response. But a spokesman for SMS.ac recounts several colourful stories told about the club: one member needed an excuse when a baseball game made him late for a party, for example, while another wanted to take a day off from work to go to the beach.

James Katz, a professor of communications at Rutgers University, says alibi clubs are a cute idea and may have some oddball uses, but will only ever appeal to a tiny minority. And even if the tall stories told about such clubs are to be believed—some of them, like the tale of a woman who supposedly broke off her engagement via an alibi club, sound suspiciously like urban legends—the problem remains that the lies told are only ever as convincing as the people who tell them.

Given the limitations of these various mobile-phone deception schemes, perhaps what is needed is a more professional approach: a fee-based service that uses trained actors to deliver plausible, pre-scripted and even personalised alibis. That would surely be more convincing than clunky technological tricks or networks of dubious strangers. No doubt an entrepreneur somewhere is already drawing up a business plan for a new firm: Alibis, Inc.

### Websites

Virgin Mobile provides a Rescue Ring service while SMS.ac has details on its Alibi and Excuse Club. Other companies selling deception products include Nemesysco and Simedda.

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