

Mobile target

Book explores revolution by wireless phone in Europe

By **K.N. Cukier**

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ROAM Making Sense of the Wireless Internet

By *Bruno Giussani*.

320 pages. \$18.99. Random House Business Books.

Europe's Internet bubble wasn't dot-com but telecom. In March 2000, as the Nasdaq hopped to daily highs, European governments set in motion what would become a financial windfall: the auctioning of licenses for third-generation mobile-phone spectrum.

It was a heady time, and a lot of hope rested on the results amid the hype. That's because Europe lost Internet 1.0, the first iteration of the Web tethered to computers - it was U.S. companies that became the global brands. Yet many believed that Europe's great lead in mobile usage would mean it could dominate the Net's next version, the wireless Web.

Today, those dreams seem silly, as license winners struggle under dangerous debt loads. On top of that, the excesses of that era have led to a backlash, a bashing of all things technology-related. But that's an overreaction. Wireless communications truly is a cornerstone of the future of business and society, affecting everything from retail shopping to cargo shipping and creating pocket-accessible revolutions in fields as diverse as entertainment and health care.

Bruno Giussani's book strikes a responsible balance between eliminating the hyperbole and illuminating the potential of the mobile Net. Formerly the European editor of the technology magazine *Industry Standard* and director of Internet strategy at the World Economic Forum, Giussani brings a global view of the developments along with an objective eye.

Though "wireless means trouble," the author writes, ticking off all the annoyances of mobile phones to which we have become accustomed, Giussani is an unmitigated optimist, describing a future when "we will actually no longer log onto the Internet, but we will be a part of the Internet, we will be a node of the network."

What does it mean to be a node, rather than a caller? It's a vision of communicating at all times, automatically, over different devices, for all sorts of reasons. "Roam" serves as an excellent primer for what's in store.

First, the book bursts the bubble of mobile hype and then explains why wireless communications really matters and how it works. Finally, it focuses on the different uses, devices and challenges that both phone companies and users will face. The book is aimed at the tech layman and explains concepts clearly, mercifully avoiding industry jargon.

Yet Giussani might be trying to do too much. Rather than offering a word about all the conceivable issues, it would be better if the book delved into more narrow themes and came to more decisive conclusions. Specifically, "Roam" does an excellent job of tracing the follies of Europe's 3G auctions in 2000, but the operators are let off too easily. What were the discussions going on inside the companies as the bids skyrocketed? Was there any regret by the auction planners that they'd brought an entire industry to the brink of bankruptcy? On this, "Roam" is mute.

Likewise, the author's background as a journalist isn't always an asset. So concerned with being balanced and neutral, Giussani at times lays out all the arguments surrounding a divisive issue but balks from taking sides.



For instance, one of the central questions facing wireless operators is whether NTT DoCoMo Inc.'s i-mode service is a uniquely Japanese phenomenon or instead can go global. Giussani suggests DoCoMo will face "difficulty" because usage patterns are vastly different in Japan from Europe and the United States and because DoCoMo lacks a dominant market position to influence business partners. Giussani misses a reason that will end up being the Achilles' heel: As wireless data services mature, there will be little to distinguish different offerings and DoCoMo will have to compete against better-known brands.

The key message from "Roam" is that the mobile Internet isn't about technology but about usage and lifestyle. "Wireless communications is about creating new freedoms," Giussani concludes. Its impact is left only to the imagination.

In the future, the mobile phone will undergo a metamorphosis and take on increasingly sophisticated uses. If Giussani's predictions prove right, it will become our keys, our wallet and perhaps even our stethoscope.

But getting there will be time-consuming, risky for the businesses and probably frustrating for the rest of us.

(K.N. Cukier is a writer specializing in technology issues and their intersection with international relations)

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