Mobile Phones, Popular Media and Everyday African Democracy: Transmissions and Transgressions

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Q6: Au: please clarify date here and in rest of manuscript. Robins et al is 2010 in References

TABLE OF CONTENTS LISTING

The table of contents for the journal will list your paper exactly as it appears below:

Mobile Phones, Popular Media and Everyday African Democracy: Transmissions and Transgressions

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The effectiveness of new media technologies, including mobile phones, to facilitate political participation and create social change has long been contested. Recent events in countries such as Mozambique, Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt have again raised questions about the role new media technologies can play to create alternative public spheres and mobilize for social action. In the African context, where access to new media technologies are marked by big divides, the widespread uptake of mobile phones has led to renewed optimism about the potential they hold for stimulating political participation and widening democratic debate. This article examines various approaches to the relation between mobile phones and participatory democracy, and argues that mobile phones do not only transmit political information needed for rational deliberation in the public sphere, but also transgresses cultural and social borders and hierarchies in the way they refashion identities and create informal economies and communicative networks.

Recently, journalist Malcolm Gladwell, writing in The New Yorker (Gladwell, 2010), questioned whether social media such as Twitter and Facebook are reinventing social movements and political activism. “The revolution will not be tweeted,” Gladwell insisted, and contrasted claims about recent protests in Iran and Moldova to civil protests in the American South in the 1960s. Civil rights protests, he insists, “happened without e-mail, texting, Facebook, or Twitter.” His main critique was that social networks are effective at increasing participation “by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires.” Social networks, he claims, only promote weak ties in contrast to earlier, offline driven protests.

One could try to imagine what the civil rights protests would have looked like had mobile phones been invented by then. Would protesters have used their phones to browse photos on Facebook or entered their location on Foursquare (“Ezell Blair checked in at the Woolworth’s in Greensboro, North Carolina”) instead of mobilizing support? Or, might the movement even have moved faster, been amplified nationally, as their 140-character messages about the whites-only seating policy at the local Woolworth’s lunch counter flitted from state to state and across the world in a matter of minutes? Would it have sparked international outraged retweets, or would...
cellphone companies have colluded with a government to block all text signals, as seemed to have happened in the recent “bread riots” in the Mozambican capital (BBC, 2010)? Residents took the streets of Maputo, prompted by Short Message Service (SMS) messages that told them to “enjoy the great day of the strike” and to “protest the increase in energy, water, mini-bus taxi and bread prices.” While the government at first resisted calls to stop price hikes, they later relented under pressure and reversed the bread prices. The government allegedly ordered mobile providers to suspend text messaging services in an attempt to quell the protests, a sign that this form of protest was taken seriously (Jacobs & Duarte, 2010).

The effectiveness of new media technologies to bring about social change is highly contested. Naysayers such as Gladwell dismiss new media activism as based on weak ties and therefore can only demand low-risk participation. Because networks lack hierarchical organization, they are apparently leaderless and cannot think strategically. Gladwell claims that “we seem to have forgotten what activism is.” In the other corner, activists like those who have contributed to blogger Sokari Ekine’s volume on SMS Activism in Africa (Ekine, 2010) might want to disagree with Gladwell’s assessment that new media technologies only make it “easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact.” For Ekine (2010, p. xi), the creative ways in which Africans have adopted and adapted the mobile phone, rather than the technology itself, is what makes mobile phones a force for social change.

The notion that social networking is low-risk might further be questioned by Fouad Mourtada, jailed for impersonating the Moroccan king’s brother on Facebook (Fairweather, 2010). Cheng Jianping, the Chinese woman sent to a labor camp for sending a tweet (Sutherland, 2010), or the Brit Paul Chambers, arrested for a joke about blowing up Robin Hood airport when snowfall spoiled his travel plans (Hughes & Walsh, 2010), would attest to the fact that even humorous exchanges along weak-tie networks carry their own risks.

The contribution of information and communications technologies (ICTs), of which mobile phones form a part, to development and democracy in Africa has been widely debated (Hahn & Kibora, 2008, p. 88). Consensus has not been reached regarding the extent to which mobile phones can create an alternative politics and facilitate social change. Assessments often hinge on the decision of whether to foreground the structural limitations of these technologies — factors such as the political economy of access, the nature of the medium that determines and limits the form and style of communication, or the agency of its users — with their creative adoptions, adaptations, and domestications of these technologies. Assessing the impact or effect of new media technologies including mobile phones seems often to be a case of the glass being half full or half empty.

Those that prefer to see the glass half full might say that the revolution has already taken place. Those for whom “only superlatives seem appropriate” (Etzo & Collender, 2010, p. 659) to describe this “revolution in Africa might remind us that mobile phones have shaped the communications landscape much more rapidly than in Europe (Hahn & Kibora, 2008, p. 88). Mobile phones are “almost always the cheapest and quickest way to communicate” (Etzo & Collender, 2010, p. 659) because this technology does not require a network of landlines, which is often absent or inadequate in Africa (Ekine, 2010, p. x). The enthusiasm with which Africans have embraced mobile phones is illustrated by anecdotes of African consumers literally breaking down doors to lay their hands on a coveted device or police having to control “overenthusiastic customers” (Southwood, 2008, p. xvii). The figures, indeed, are astounding. There are more than 350 million mobile phone subscribers on the continent, representing a 550% rise in take-up...
in the five years between 2003 and 2008. Average penetration of mobiles in Africa is more than a third of the population, with Gabon, the Seychelles, and South Africa standing at almost 100% penetration (Smith, 2009). What is more, these figures do not even tell the full story of access to mobiles, as handsets and subscriptions are often shared (Etzo & Collender, 2010, p. 660). (Internet use is a slightly different and in places a less rosy picture, to which we will return later.) Mobiles are considered ideal vehicles for the deepening of democracy (e.g., through the promotion and monitoring of elections) and development (the so-called ICT4D usage) because they enable users to leapfrog fixed-line infrastructure which in many areas of Africa is lacking.

These mobile optimists point out that phones are used for much more than making calls. There are “1,001 uses” (Berger, 2008) of mobile phones beyond voice communication. Africans use mobiles to text, transfer money (with the M-Pesa service in Kenya seen as a trailblazer in this regard), check market prices for agricultural products, monitor elections, and send and receive public health or emergency messages (through services such as Ushahidi or Frontline SMS). Apart from what may be considered more “serious” uses of mobiles, Africans use mobiles in everyday life to take photographs, make films, search the Internet, and, increasingly, for social networking (Berger, 2008, 2010; Essoungou, 2010; Etzo & Collender, 2010; FreedomFone, 2010; Smith, 2009). The range of functionalities of mobile phones make it an “extremely versatile technology” (Ekine, 2010, p. xi) that can be used by activists to plan campaigns long in advance or respond quickly to events. Although the versatile “third generation” smart phones are not yet as prevalent in Africa as in the North, older communication practices such as radio trottoir are combined with new technologies in novel and creative ways (Mabweazara, 2010, p. 14; Nyamnjoh, in Wasserman, 2009).

During the past two decades of research into ICTs in Africa, initial utopian visions of what new technologies could mean for politics tended to eventually dissipate. In the early 1990s, ICTs were seen as heralding a new era for African democracy (Mudhai, Tettey, & Banda, 2009, p. 1). This optimism was often based on technologically determinist assumptions that the introduction of new technologies per se will bring about social change and deepen democratic participation. In theorizing the African digital public sphere, postulations of what ICTs might mean for African societies frequently drew on older modernization paradigms of “development”: a universal, linear trajectory of progress was assumed to be facilitated through media, consisting of various stages that could be “leapfrogged” by new technologies. However, when this optimism proved to be exaggerated, questions about access, inequality, power, and quality of information returned (Mudhai, Tettey, & Banda, 2009, p. 1).

The more recent enthusiasm for mobile phones in Africa sometimes bears resonances of the early evangelism around the use of the internet for democracy in Africa. The excitement generated by mobile phones seems more justified because it has already been proven that mobiles are much more accessible than other ICT platforms such as personal computers and fixed-line telephones. Earlier indicators of the Digital Divide, such as Castells’ observation (1998/2010, pp. 94–95) that the continent was “excluded from the information technology revolution” because there were more telephone lines in Tokyo or Manhattan than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, seems to fast become redundant.

Critics also have issued warnings that mobile telephony is not the panacea for the problems marking the African public sphere. For many Africans, the handsets are too expensive and running costs are too high to permit full use of the capabilities offered by mobile technologies. They
remain restricted to more passive usage — waiting for someone to call them or use free “beeping” or “please call me” texts to communicate. As is the case with all technologies, mobile phones are not socially neutral tools, but rather can entrench or exacerbate unequal gendered or classed power relations (Etzo & Collender, 2010, pp. 660, 666).

Even given these limitations, there are strong indications that mobile phones have changed social practices on the continent. Southwood (2008) typifies the reshaping of the social geography of Africa as a result of the connectivity provided by mobile phones as “less walk and more talk.” However, the nature and extent of these changes are neither uniform nor equally distributed. High penetration of mobile phones into the market should not automatically be taken as an indication of high usage of phones or as having an unqualified positive effect on the social lives of Africans. A recent study (Montez, 2010) of mobile phone use in Zambia found that 63% of users agreed strongly that a mobile phone is expensive. Even in a country such as South Africa, with one of the highest penetration rates on the continent (Smith, 2009), call costs are “prohibitively high” (Duncan, 2010). It is especially the poor customers in this country, using pay-as-you-go services rather than contracts, who are worst hit by the exorbitant rates charged by phone companies. One study (Duncan, 2009) found that informal settlement dwellers in a South African town spent 27.5% of their income on communications costs, using money set aside for essential items such as food to buy airtime. Women were more adversely affected by men by communications costs, leading to a knock-on effect on children and the infirm for whom women are often the caregivers (Duncan, 2009). These findings mitigate the euphoric notions of mobility, independence, and individuality often characterizing discourses around mobile phones in Africa. Again, however, there are ways of viewing the political economy of mobile use as a glass half full rather than half empty.

Indeed, “Africa is truly a crucible for mobile phone innovation and entrepreneurship” (Etzo & Collender, 2010, p. 659), and users often display remarkable creativity in overcoming the obstacles put in their way by exorbitant pricing structures. For instance, where connectivity costs might restrict users to “beeping” or “flashing” (these messages are called “please call me’s” in South Africa), they develop a code or protocol amongst themselves to enable them to interpret such beeps as messages with varied meanings (see Duncan, 2009; Etzo & Collender, 2010, p. 666).

There are rare occasions where the new scramble for the African mobile market by big companies can have good spinoffs for individual users, as the media company Facebook has shown when it worked out a deal with 50 African mobile operators in 45 countries to launch the free service Facebook Zero. Through this deal, African mobile users can now access and use Facebook for free, even if they do not have any credit on their phones (Facebook Zero, 2010).

Also, the subscriber rates of mobile phones (although impressive in some cases, like the 87.08% of the population in South Africa) do not tell the full story of the number of handsets per person, or people sharing one handset (Ekine, 2010, p. x), or the street vendors in Uganda offering mobile access on a per-call basis (and inviting their customers to charge their phones using car batteries [Smith, 2009]). Although celebrating this adoption and adaptation by African users of mobile phones might lead one to forget that Africans would much rather have the same levels of access taken for granted in the North than having to resort to “creativity,” these practices do suggest alternative ways of thinking about the relation between new technologies and political participation in Africa. Too often, discourses around mobile phones make an interpretive leap from access figures to speculation about the impact of mobile phones on democracy and development. This leap from access to effect, bypassing the unpredictable and highly contextualized
usage of phones in everyday life, has lead to either overoptimistic conjecture about the potential impact of mobile phones or moral panics about their detrimental influence.

In response to earlier developments in ICTs, Francis Nyamnjoh has argued for “mitigated euphoria” in assessing the perceived benefits of the “information superhighway” for Africans (Nyamnjoh, 1999). In his critique of the technologically deterministic approaches that emphasize connectivity, technology transfer and training, Nyamnjoh called for a socio-anthropological approach to the development of ICTs that would allow Africa to “regulate, adapt and innovate ICT to its own needs and priorities for sustainable development” (1999, p. 31). An assessment of mobile phones in everyday life will still not tell us of their “effect” on African politics, but it will help us understand how politics, popular culture, and media are entwined in intricate networks and circuits.

The view of mobiles as radically new technologies that will revolutionize African societies may also be predicated on a patronizing ideological assumption of Northern technological progress as a benevolent force for the “underdeveloped” South (Mabweazara, 2010, pp. 13–14). Much of the debate around mobile phones in Africa, whether celebratory or dismissive, seems to be based on a model of media transmission leading to direct effects. Such technologically determinist, transmission thinking bears resemblance to outdated “communication for development” approaches that tend to see technology as a modernizing force to be introduced into African settings, rather than turning the attention to the ways in which these technologies are actively contextualized and domesticated by African users. Fortunately, alternative approaches, based on a sociological and contextualized understanding of mobile phone use in Africa and its convergence with other forms of communication (see, e.g., De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, & Brinkman, 2009; Willems, 2010a) and surveys from a demand side (e.g., Montez, 2010), are also emerging. As new technologies, mobile phones do pose new opportunities and challenges to democratic life in Africa. At the same time, these technologies are taken up by people in a varied, heterogenous African context that in many ways is dissimilar from contexts in the developed world. More nonreductionist analyses that steer a path between technical and social determinism (Ling, 2004, p. 23) are needed to provide us with a picture of mobile phones in Africa that is rich, textured, and varied.

Where the transmission model of mobile phone use is particularly concerned with issues of distribution and access, ethnographic approaches are firstly interested in patterns of use and deployment. In other words, the technology centered model is concerned with what happens to people when mobile phones are used to transmit information to them; the context-centered model is more interested in what happens to the technology when it is appropriated and adapted by people — people who use mobile phones to transgress the boundaries imposed by the state, the culture, the economy, and by the technology-capitalism complex itself. Approaches such as social constructivism or actor-network theory have suggested that neither technology nor society should be taken as overdetermining but should be seen as mutually implicated (Goggin, 2006, p. 11; Mabweazara, 2010, p. 19). The domestication approach (Ling, 2004, p. 26), which focuses on the adoption, adaptation, and integration of technology in everyday life as an ongoing process of negotiation, is perhaps the most suitable framework within which to think of the role of mobile phones as “material objects with a particular social and economic embedding” (Hahn & Kibora, 2008).

The challenge remains however to link this micro-level approach to broader democratic discourses. We need to find out what the domestication of mobile phones within a specific
socio-cultural and politico-economic context in Africa tells us about people’s engagement or disengagement with politics, how the popular relates to the political and everyday life links to democratic processes. We can expect an ethnographic approach to mobile phones to tell us more about the integration of phones in the everyday life of Africans, that is, how they use phones to socialize, be entertained, organize their daily routines, and do their jobs. But how can we connect everyday life with the processes of democracy and the imperatives for development? Texting and tweeting might enrich our social lives, but will it lead to political and social change? Perhaps this question assumes a too rigid separation of the political and the seemingly mundane, between democratic participation and popular culture, between civic and social identities. Mobile phones are interesting in terms of their social and cultural contexts of use precisely because they tend to break down and redraw the boundaries between the private and the public (Goggin, 2006, p. 4). While this blurring of the private/public divide may seem disconcerting for observers who prefer their politics rational and deliberative, it may pose interesting new possibilities for an understanding of the private as political, and for the popular as having serious public implications. Instead of dismissing the carnival of text chats, social networking, music downloads, gossip etc as having no revolutionary potential, mobile phones challenge us to pay attention to how these popular uses transgress the realm of the private into the realm of the public. Not only the serious transmission of political information in the Habermasian sense, but also the frivolous, Bakhtinian pleasures and precariousness of everyday life (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010) are important to take note of, especially in the African context where mainstream media channels are often captured by elites or the state.

Although Africa (with the exclusion of major urban centers) might not yet be as media-saturated as the Global North, one can increasingly say (in following Deuze, Blank, & Speers, 2009) that Africans do not live with media but in media. Online/offline lives are becoming integrated. Mobile phones are not external to people’s lives but an integral part of them. It therefore makes more sense to think of mobiles as transmitting information from the outside world into people’s daily environment but instead being integrated with their daily lives, routines, and rituals. It is in this “everyday Africa” (De Bruijn, Nyamnjoh, & Brinkman, 2009) that people use mobile phones to transgress pre-existing boundaries and limitations. These transgressions are not always progressive, but they constitute important shifts in the socio-cultural landscape of Africa.

Indeed, mobile phones in Africa are not merely technological tools that can be studied in isolation from broader social and political processes. They also are cultural technologies that play an “indispensable role in the everyday lives of consumers” and should be investigated in terms of the cultures of consumption that they create but also how they fit in with larger cultural settings (Goggin, 2006, pp. 2–3). Therefore, one of the first questions we should ask when looking at these everyday lives is to what extent the theories about mobile phones, largely developed in the Global North, provide an adequate grasp of “the deeper cultural dimensions of different societies” (Goggin, 2006, p. 14). For instance, to what extent do social and material circumstances in Africa militate against the “mobility, portability, and customisation” (Goggin, 2006, p. 2) promised by mobile phones?

How does this transmission and transgression take place? Let us consider some of the key areas in which mobile phones are seen to make a difference in public and political life in Africa.
There has been much optimism about the potential of mobile phones for the emergence of “e-democracy” or “networked politics” in Africa. In most of Africa, the relationship between state and media has been a fragile and conflicted one. Many African states exert strong influence in or control the airwaves, and business interests often align themselves with political power. The advent of ICTs, especially mobile phones, has been seen as providing avenues for “e-democracy.” ICTs have been seen as vehicles to provide information to the electorate to enable them to exercise a rational choice or have been used by politicians to align themselves with popular culture in the hope that the popularity will rub off on them (Willems, 2010b).

An example of this communication was the use of SMS and social networking by political parties in South Africa to communicate with their supporters ahead of the 2009 elections (Nielsen, 2009). Although the highly popular platform MXIT (it boasts more messages per day than tweets sent globally) declined a request by the African National Congress (ANC) to host political information, the social network Mig33, hosted in the United States, did provide a platform for political information (Walton & Donner, 2009). In other African countries, mobile phones are used as tools of surveillance and for citizens to monitor political processes, for instance, during the elections in Ghana in 2008 where monitors would send SMSs to an operational center operated by the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) (Verclas, 2008). The platform Ushahidi has also been used to monitor elections via SMS in various African countries including Egypt, Sudan, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia (see http://blog.ushahidi.com/index.php/category/elections/).

These types of campaigns are, however, still hampered by unequal access to mobile social networks, and consequently subaltern counterpublics do not always gain access to a mediatized public sphere (Walton & Donner, 2009). The mobilization of counterpublics via mobile phones seems to be successful for amplifying a brief political campaign or event but less successful in ensuring “ongoing and higher levels of accountability” (Walton & Donner, 2009). For the deepening of democracy in Africa, surveillance of government also has to happen in between the “ritual of elections” (Willems, 2010b), for example, through ongoing social movement and civil society campaigns. Mobile phones have proved useful to social movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa to, for instance, document and archive their work (see www.abahlali.org). Overall, the use of mobile phones to transmit e-democracy across a broad front, and from the bottom-up as well as the top-down, seems still to be more promise than reality.

However, broader questions need to be asked than just the instrumentalist ones about the relative success or failure of the information transmitted in e-democracy campaigns. Attention should be paid to how mobile phones become platforms for expressions of the political dimensions of popular culture (Willems, 2010b). The use of mobile phones to spread rumors during elections can either be seen as a breakdown of the rational deliberation (Walton & Donner, 2009) or, as Willems (2010a, p. 56) suggests with regards to political debate in Zimbabwe, as a way to transgress the limitations of the public sphere by drawing on the resources of popular culture. The circulation of gossip, rumors, jokes and “SMS Wars” (Walton & Donner, 2009) via mobiles can be seen as the latest incarnation of the well-known trope of radio trottoir (Ellis, 1989, p. 321), the popular and unofficial medium of discussion of political affairs in Africa. Political rumors, gossip and jokes display the agency of mobile phone users to circumvent limits on the media (e.g., political restrictions in Zimbabwe, or economic limitations to access in South...
Africa) and could be read as critical comment on the political system and/or the mediatized public sphere itself. The jokes, SMS wars and gossip-mongering should also be seen alongside the rise of satiric websites, television programs, and social networking sites (e.g., ZA News and *Late Night News with Loyiso Gola* in South Africa, or fake Twitter accounts making fun of ANC Youth League president Julius Malema [see, e.g., Benjamin, 2010], and TV programs such as *Redykyulass* and *XYZ* in Kenya [see Ogola, 2010]). These satirical uses of media, including ICTs and mobile phones, alert us to the fact that popular media provide alternative ways of engaging with the state and with politics that do not carry the formal hallmarks of liberal democracy. They suggest that formal politics are not universally experienced as making a difference to the daily lived experience of poverty and marginalization experienced by many Africans (Willems, 2010). As such, the transgression of formal political processes and rational debate in the media that take place on mobile networks has to be taken seriously when we try to understand the implications of mobile phones for political processes in Africa.

**ICT AND LOCAL POLITICS**

Practices such as alternative or citizen journalism, often facilitated by mobile phones, have been seen to hold the promise of bridging these divides between civil society and the state and between citizens and the mainstream media (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). However, the status of citizenship in South Africa should not be confused with the practice of citizenship, as Steenveld and Strelitz (2010) remind us with reference to Heller (2009). In countries such as South Africa (similar to other parts of the Global South, like India), social inequalities are deeply entrenched and subaltern citizens find it difficult to engage effectively with the state, especially on the level of local government (Heller, 2009, p. 132). This means that the Habermasian ideal of rational deliberation, as claimed by the mainstream media, is in practice often eschewed in favor of concerns of “culture, language, and the embodied expression of daily life” that are found in informal, radical, or alternative media (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010). The question that arises is whether citizen journalism via mobile phones should be viewed as a vehicle for rational deliberation in the Habermasian sense or whether it lends itself towards the articulation of everyday life, in alternative languages and dialects, and in forms that contradict the formal structures of mainstream journalism. A problem with some forms of citizen journalism, where citizens use mobile phones to produce content for mainstream media, is precisely that citizens are “given voice” by allowing them to rationally transmit their views and become represented in mainstream channels — instead of allowing them to transgress mainstream norms and practices in Bakthinian fashion and actively enter political life on their own terms (Steenveld & Strelitz, 2010, cf. Robins, Cornwall, & Von Lieres, 2008, p. 1072).

When we consider the role that mobile phones may play in local politics and how they may contribute to the practices of citizenship, we need to not restrict our focus on the “rational” aspects of transmission of political information such as e-government on a local level (which may include the dissemination of information about local politics, service delivery, voting, etc). We also need to take into account the ways in which mobile phones allow citizens to transgress the rules of “good citizenship” and political practices. For instance, mobile phones may allow users to opt for “strategic nonparticipation” (Robins, Cornwall, & Von Lieres, 2008, p. 1072) as a political strategy (e.g., by circulating gossip or jokes in the style of *radio trottoir* instead of
accessing formal political information or debates) or participate in a political culture of clientelism (by using mobile phone networks to gain access to powerful political stakeholders). They may choose to use their mobile phones to mobilize for street protests and activism (Ekine, 2010) instead of behaving like good citizens and download government communiqués or engage in rational debate via the exchange of texts. These “weapons of the weak” might be frowned upon by donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who want to establish a rational, liberal democracy in Africa, but they also represent a real form of political engagement in postcolonial African societies marked by continued exclusions and marginalizations (Robins, Cornwall, & Von Lieres, 2008, p. 107). Indeed, the use of mobile phones to transgress the formal channels of information dissemination and consultation may substantiate the claim that “Everyday politics in Africa [. . .] is highly provisional and improvisational” (Robins, Cornwall, & Von Lieres, 2008, p. 1080).

ICT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

We have already noted that the discourse surrounding mobile phones in Africa often avails itself of older paradigms of communication for development. The transmission and diffusion of technological innovation, as a knock-on effect of the introduction of mobile technology, is seen within this approach to hold the potential to modernize African societies and economies. Consequently, examples of how mobile phones succeeded in helping African entrepreneurs build businesses are often held up as illustration of the transformative potential of mobile phones. Southwood (2008, p. xiv) cites the example of a plumber in Dakar who, before the advent of mobile phones, took three days to get back to desperate customers who had to leave messages at a shop where he would only collect them in the evenings after his house calls. Another example Southwood cites (and is often found in other case study literature) is that of a rural farmer who, before he could call up to get stock prices, had to take the time, effort, and expense to visit a market to find out if prices are good enough to sell his goods.

The greater ease and reach of transmission of information, has undoubtedly benefited African economies, be that farmers linking to large international markets or small entrepreneurs running businesses from day to day. The personal economies of individuals in Africa are also increasingly being shaped by remittances being sent via mobile phones, which are increasingly being used as “wallets” to pay for goods and services in African cities.

Mobile phones also enable users to transgress the limitations and boundaries of formal economies. These limitations include the often exorbitant costs imposed by mobile phone companies themselves (cf the political economy critique of Duncan, 2009 mentioned earlier). In the process of these transgressions, informal economies are created that crisscross formal economies, undermine them, and articulate with people’s everyday lives.

From this point of view, mobile phone users in Africa are not merely the passive victims of the exploitation of big companies, but are also active consumers. As Etzo and Collender note, “a large informal economy has also emerged to support the mobile sector, with people selling airtime, charging and fixing mobiles, and renting them out” (2010, p. 659).

Participation in this informal economy requires perhaps a different kind of technology knowledge than the kind NGOs and development agencies endeavor transmitting to African users. It also requires a different kind of ICT entrepreneurship than the kind developed by mobile
companies that identify Africa as the next big market for mobile telephony (as described in Southwood, 2008). It requires knowing how to unblock secondhand phones so they can use different SIM cards, knowing how to switch different prepaid SIM cards so as to optimally use the free minutes provided by each, how to transmit and receive money or vouchers in return for favors, how to use Bluetooth functionality to swap music between friends and develop your own social capital in the everyday circle of friends, using “flashing” or “beeping” to develop a code of communication when you have run out of money for airtime.

This approach to the transgressive economies of mobile phone use in Africa would ask different questions than the affordability of contracts or prepaid calls, and assess the impact of mobile phones not about the economic capacity of mobile phone users but by the “local strategies (used) to bypass the rules of the market” as Hahn and Kibora (2008, pp. 94–96) observed in Burkina Faso, where mobile phones have become an “integral part of social life.”

Apart from economic capital, mobile phones also provide social capital. Southwood (2008, p. xvi) refers to mobile phones as being the “sports car” of its age in Africa, an aspirational status symbol within affordable reach. So, if we think about mobile phones not only in terms of their economic instrumentality, but also in terms of the transgressive potential they hold for African users to actively construct alternative economies, we will end up with a much more textured and varied picture than looking at formal economic indicators alone.

CONNECTING AFRICAN LOCALES TO GLOBAL NETWORKS

Mobile phones are generally taken to be “freedom-enhancing” (Sen, 2010, p. 2) and facilitating greater flexibility in terms of time and space. International studies suggest that mobile phones create and maintain weak ties through social networks that create fragmented, individualized worlds, even if users paradoxically display greater dependence on others and on communicative systems (Urry, 2007, p. 176). We know that examples abound of how mobile phones have put Africans in touch with each other, resulting in “less walk and more talk” (Southwood, 2008).

In Africa, mobile phones are frequently seen as vehicles for modernization, which will increase speed, decrease distance, and make Africans participants in the processes of globalization. However, studies have suggested that in Africa mobiles are used less to connect with the “global” world and more to affirm local family and friendship links (Hahn & Kibora, 2008, pp. 89–90).

Does this preference for using mobile phones to establish and maintain private networks — whether fragmented, weak-tie networks, or family — constitute a threat to political participation and the exercise of citizenship? In a country such as South Africa, where marginalization and alienation from the public sphere continue to be the dominant experience of the majority of citizens (Von Lieres, 2005, p. 23), how should we “read” the immense popularity of social networking sites such as Mxit (with its 20 million users and more messages sent daily than the total global Tweets [MyBroadband 2010]) in political terms? Should we view this popularity as a lamentable form of disengagement from formal politics (see Walton & Donner, 2009) or as political comment in itself, where users seek ways to establish networks and create social capital in a highly precarious, unpredictable, and unequal society? Should the fact that political information is not being transmitted in a formal, recognizable fashion on social networks such as Mxit be read as a sign of the failure of mobile phones to contribute to political and social change,
or should we rather be attentive to the ways in which these networks enable users to transgress the limits of inherited social and gendered identities? Or, in fact, do these social network sites reinforce existing social and gendered identities, punishing those that dare to transgress them?

Unpacking the implications of mobile use for the construction, maintenance, or revision of identity boundaries is not an easy task. Paradoxically, while mobile phones hold the promise of class mobility, they can also contribute to social stasis. Mobile sites such as the teen networking forum Mxit and the gossip site Outoilet usually seem sexually libertarian to the point of being considered immoral (recently Outoilet was blocked by mobile phone operators in South Africa after that country’s Film and Publication Board served the site with a closing down notice, following incidents of sexual violence and child pornography; see Nthoiwa, 2010). However transgressive the sexual content of these sites may be, they are often underpinned by conservative social politics (similar to the way in which lurid tabloid content often co-exist with patriarchal identity politics; see Wasserman, 2010). Affairs between races or above one’s own class are frowned upon in a strategy of policing identity boundaries. Gender identities tend also to be static rather than flexible, with traditional, subjective roles assigned to girls/women. So while mobile phones may facilitate the transgression of identity boundaries, they also may contribute to fixing them.

These paradoxes of identity construction via mobile phones are not an individual concern but rather have implications for political participation. Political positions are often articulated via race or ethnicity. The postelection crisis in Kenya in 2007–2008 has shown how mobile phones can be used to incite ethnic-based violence. When disputed presidential elections in this country led to a month-long outbreak of violence across the country, mobile phones were used to distribute provocative text messages containing hate speech (Nyabuga & Mudhai, 2009; Quist-Arcton, 2008). The transgressive potential of mobile phones is therefore not solely a positive force.

CONCLUSION

Approaches to mobile phone use such as the domestication model refuse to afford either technology or society a deterministic role but view technology and society in interaction. This interaction is described via an examination of everyday life, to establish how mobile phones are imagined, appropriated, objectified, incorporated, and converted by their users (Ling, 2004, p. 28). Such an approach would typically eschew the grand claims of impact and effect associated with technologically determinist models. At the same time, however, such a micro-level analysis might neglect the links between the everyday and the political, between notions of social and cultural identity forged in the interaction with mobiles and broader issues of democratization and development underway in African settings. The challenge to understand the significance of mobile telephones for African democracies, including alternative/activist politics and processes of development and social change, is to explore how these broader discourses are related to everyday practices. In doing so, studies of mobile phones can fruitfully draw on existing ethnographic work on informal communication networks in Africa. By establishing the links between

2I owe this insight to my colleague Alette Schoon.
the popular and the political, we can arrive at an understanding of what politics mean in the day-
to-day lives of people instead of trying to establish the often intangible impact of mobile phones
on broader processes such as elections. When we turn our focus to these intersections of the
popular and the political, to the practices of “everyday democracy” (Wasserman, 2010), we can
see mobile phones as not merely technologies transmitting democratic and civic information but
also as the location where people are transgressing the hitherto fixed boundaries of what counts
as political participation or civic identification.

REFERENCES


