

Mobile Phones Influence on Journalism Practice in Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The European Commission Mobile Phones Product Sheet (2009) defines a mobile phone as a portable battery powered device that is principally used for telephone communication and text messaging, but may include additional features, like internet capability and camera or video. Journalism on the other hand, refers to the work of ‘professional news people’ that are informational reports of recent or current events of interest to the public (McQuail, 2003, p. 498). Considering that the major business and raw material for journalists is information, the changes in the means of accessing, processing, storing and exchanging information are of much interest to media scholars and researchers.

New technology in Africa has transformed the journalism platform at both content production and content delivery, so mobile phones are being leveraged to varying degrees of formality and levels of engagement to both produce content and improve access to information (Verclas & Mechael, 2008, p. 6). Due to its ability for 2-way participatory oral communication, even over long distances, the mobile has power to enable the user to be in two places at the same time or simultaneously (Wicander, 2010, p.18). The mobile industry has already had a transformative effect on the social and economic life of Sub-Saharan Africa but there

is scope for far greater growth and innovation, if the right conditions are established, which would unlock the potential of a dynamic and interconnected Africa (GSMA, 2013).

OVERVIEW

Journalists do not operate in a vacuum, but work within a social context. So, when assessing usage and impact of mobile phones on journalists’ performance, it is important to analyze the other end/audience or the social context by considering the community access and participation using the new digital media (Carpentier et al., 2003). As De Bruijn (2009) notes basing on her study in Mali, Chad and Cameroon, the Internet and mobile phone in principle have the power to drive a society towards a knowledge and information society within the conceptual framework of ‘technological determinism’. However, technology is not leading to the progressive development that it might have had in a neutral world (Semujju, 2013), so instead of aiding development, technology is leading to increasing divides, like the digital divide and now the ‘technology divide’ or ‘mobile divide’ (De Bruijn, 2009; Hudson, 2006; Rice & Katz, 2003).

Under the *Mobile Africa Revisited* project, WOTRO (2007) points out that the focus on technological determinism in analyzing ICT impact is

positing studies in a historical vacuum, overlooking the history of communication technologies in Africa and conceptualizing ICTs in terms of linear technical progress, with an assumption that individuals are passive consumers of ICTs. This view is supported by De Bruijn (2010), who argues that ICT impacts cannot be assessed in terms of 'effects' as these are processes of mutual interaction between people and new tools.

The analysis will therefore start with an overview of the mobile trends in Africa, after which views of early scholars' on the role of technology in transforming society will be highlighted using Marshall McLuhan's Medium theory as the theoretical framework. Against this background, a review is done of the current scholarship on the impact of mobile phones on journalism, specifically focusing on Mobile Journalism and Citizen Journalism, after which several challenges facing mobile phone usage by Journalists in Africa are highlighted. From the assessment, pointers are given to areas for further research on how 'mobiles 4 development' can be used in strategic communication so as to facilitate development in African countries.

Although research on mobile phone impact on journalism is still a relatively new area, several scholars have contributed insights in this area. Professor Manuel Castells (Castells, 2000) at the University of Southern California; Prof. James E. Katz & Prof. Mark Aakhus (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) of Rutgers University; Prof. Ronald E. Rice at University of California & Prof. James E. Katz (2003) are among the earliest scholars examining this topic. Current leading experts in the area include: Prof. Mirjam de Bruijn (De Bruijn 2009; 2010; 2010) at Leiden University; Dr. Jonathan Donner (2008) at the Technology for Emerging Markets Group at Microsoft Research India; Dr. Hayes M. Mabweazara (Mabweazara, 2011; 2013) at Falmouth University and Dr. Oscar Westlund (Westlund, 2008; 2009; 2013) at University of Gothenburg.

Mobile Phone Trends in Africa

Studies show that the mobile has achieved a global presence faster than any other form of information and communication technology (Rice & Katz, 2003; Smith et al., 2011) and the small, mundane device is now an essential intrinsic part of our everyday life that has changed the sense of ourselves and the way we see the world (Green & Haddon, 2009). Mobile phones have become very important to Africa's development as several studies have shown (Hudson, 2006; Parr, 2013; Pringle & David, 2002). Mobile communication constitutes the primary form of access and the increased exchange of information is contributing to development goals, with mobile telephony having the most immediate potential to stimulate growth in developing countries, especially in Africa (Wicander, 2010, p.132).

The GSMA, which represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide in over 220 countries, shows in their report '*Sub-Saharan Africa Mobile Economy 2013*' that mobiles contribute over 6% of the region's GDP, higher than any other comparable region globally, and this is forecast to rise to over 8% by 2020 (GSMA, 2013). It is noted that the African economy has been growing at a rate of about 5% a year for the past decade and, it is predicted to grow more quickly than that of any other continent over the next 5 years. The booming ICT sector, and in particular the rapid growth of mobile communications, is credited with having driven much of this remarkable economic expansion (Parr, 2013).

Globally, mobile access has grown rapidly with Sub-Saharan Africa leading the world in mobile phone growth and impact (Parr, 2013), with an annual growth rate of 18% in the subscriber base over the past 5 years (GSMA, 2013). In Africa, by 2008, the average usage rate was 63% growing to 83% in 2013, with 14 countries having access rates above 90% (Afrobarometer, 2013). Elsewhere, ITU (2013) puts the mobile-cellular penetration

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