

Chapter 15

The Impact of Mobile Phone Uses in the Developing World: Giving Voice to the Rural Poor in the Congo

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ABSTRACT

Around the turn of the year 2020, unprecedented challenges rocked the world, casting a spotlight on large swathes of the world's populations still unconnected and those connected being gravely plagued by inequalities and racism. The promises of rapid/digital mobile phone dissemination around the world have evaporated. To add to these woes, despite the amount of writings produced on mobile phones, Western bias is surprisingly unbridledly prevailing alongside the fêted wireless connections/apps. Expansive literature tends to present the rapid adoption of mobile phones among rural individuals, with little to no indication of how local values and voices are respected or promoted. This chapter is a study that undertook semi-structured interviews with 16 rural chiefs to inquire into ways in which mobile phones enabled socio-economic development in the rural Congo. Rather than using quantitative, large-scale, or top-down data, the study sought to give voice to chiefs themselves about the role of mobile phones.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to be a multidisciplinary research since ICTs tend to cross-cut and resist disciplinary boundaries. The first recorded commercial use and production of handheld mobile phones trace as far back as the early 1980s while their ancestry can be extended to the invention of radio in 1894 by Marconi (Siapera, 2012). But mobile phones have not gripped academic researchers until around the mid-2000s. Indeed, by the end of the 2000s onward, mobile phones have gained prominence in developing countries faster than any ICT known in human history (ITU [International Telecommunication Union], 2013). At the same time, it bears noting that since their inception, mobile phones have drawn criticism as to their developmental effects among rural communities and individuals. As an illustration, Qureshi (2019) recently called into question the fact that ICT researchers barely investigate the concept development. One potent criticism was, for example, about the conceptual framework or more exactly the manner in which mobile phones were being transplanted from the West to the rest of the world, especially the poor. As Gough (2005) warned,

It seemed extraordinary that a technology that has clearly taken the world by storm had attracted so little rigorous research... We wanted the work to be able to survive the scrutiny of a potentially skeptical audience... Most important is the fact that the ways in which mobiles are used, valued and owned in the developing world are very different from the developed countries... The value of communications in the developing world is also different [emphasis added]. (p. 1)

However, due to the mounting popularity of mobile phones the criticism raised has escaped and still does the attention of mobile phone researchers and designers. Perhaps not surprisingly, Gough's (2005) remark is one of the least cited and known accounts of the Vodafone research program (Waverman, Meschi, & Fuss, 2005) that is now widely accepted as the landmark research into the developmental effects of mobile phones in developing countries, particularly in Africa. In other words, the Vodafone series study is known more for the rising adoption of mobile phones than for the warnings made against biased or lax research into mobile phones. As a result, the idea of bias as regards mobile phone research is hardly addressed in relevant ICT literature. By all means, this is not saying that important topics of research were not addressed by ICT researchers (see Avgerou, 2017; Hatakka, Thapa, & Zhang, 2018; May, Dutton, & Munyakazi, 2014; Sein, Thapa, Hatakka, & Sæbø, 2019; Unwin, 2017; Walsham, 2013, 2017; Qureshi, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020; Zheng, Hatakka, Sahay, & Andersson, 2018)

To add to the conundrum, a large number of critics continue to lament the consequences of Western bias around the world. For example, Sen (1999) wrote,

The contemporary world is dominated by the West, and even though the imperial authority of the erstwhile rulers of the world has declined, the dominance of the West remains as strong as ever – in some ways stronger than before, especially in cultural matters. The sun does not set on the empires of Coca-Cola or MTV. (p. 240)

As can be seen, this is the context in which new technologies such as mobile phones are being produced and disseminated. As Ojo (2013) reminded us, “questions and issues underpinning the ICTs [as well as mobile phones] for development are not merely economic ones” (pp. 94-95). The Western bias

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