

Chapter 5

The Cultural, Economic and Political Implications of New Media: A Case Study on Mobile Telephony among University Students in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the extent to which the cell phone technology has impacted on the lives of young Kenyans, especially within the context of a university in Kenya. Kenya has had a tremendous technological leap from the 1990s where landlines were the main tools of communication, to mobile telephony where people can now communicate any time, any place. The ramifications of such a new and stunning technology in Kenya are very important, especially if there are pernicious effects emanating from the novel technology.

This study involved 100 university students at the United States International University in Nairobi, Kenya. The questionnaires were randomly distributed and collected after a week. The entire survey took one month.

The findings point out that mobile telephony has become an indispensable tool for most youth providing them with a great sense of control and freedom. However, the technology is also rife with concerns about personal autonomy, dishonesty, breach of cultural norms, personal security and that of others, especially when texting while driving, et cetera.

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1. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The mobile telephony in Kenya has been a veritable technological as well as a cultural revolution. It is simply mind-boggling how a technology that was hardly known in the early 1990s has now become too popular to the point of becoming banal. Similarly, the incredible ubiquity of the mobile technology has also confounded economic analysts since the technology had been deemed too onerous for ordinary Kenyans who purportedly live under one US dollar per day. Research by KENET (2009) reveals that the mobile technology has the all-high penetration of more than 6 million Kenyans spread across the entire country. Safaricom alone has 3 million subscribers, almost a tenth of Kenya's entire population. This penetration does not seem to care about the glaring economic disparities in the various parts of Kenya.

In Kenya today, owning a mobile phone is no longer trendy but functional. It is less a status symbol than a tool whose existence has become quasi-indispensable. True, some units (iPods, Blackberry, top Nokia series, etc) are still loud statements of economic class. Nevertheless, the technology is no longer novel and its ubiquity across the country is amazing.

A glance at some of the previous studies conducted in other parts of the world indicates that the new media has been associated with some obvious cultural transformations. For instance, Weinberg (2009) notes that in Syria, relatives call before making a courtesy call, a clear departure from the culture that greatly values family relations. She further notes that Syrian women feel liberated by the cell phone as they can now freely talk with men without the family restrictions and surveillance associated with the landline.

Drolet (2009) notes with concern how the cell phone can impact social behavior. For instance, some people respond to cell phone calls even while in the bathroom, a behavior that is normally reprehensible. In addition, the habit of talking loudly and for long spells of time on the cell phone

appears bizarre as it stands in stark contrast with the conventional image of "talking to someone visible". Talking to oneself – as it appears – is a sign of dementia in most cultures.

In Uzbekistan, Wei (2005) describes three reasons for owning a phone, namely prestige, necessity for work, and a gift from parents. A preliminary survey among university students in Kenya echoes the same reasons. However, most of the students do not consider prestige to be a significant issue; for them the need to "connect with buddies" seems most important.

Bhuiyan (2006) makes a case for the convergence of media where the mobile phone becomes a tool for social communication, business, surfing the internet, blogging, vlogging etc. With such potency, the new media revolutionizes the way a society configures its information origination, delivery and commentary.

The versatility and wide usage of the cell phone technology creates an urgency not to mention immediacy in the transmission and reception of information. In Kenya today, it's almost unacceptable not to return a missed call; neither is it forgivable to forget a cell phone at home. The unsaid rule is *one should be reachable at all times, and anywhere*; a scenario reminiscent of Big Brother in George Orwell's 1984.

The current study focussed on the acquisition, usage and impact of cell phone technology among university students – undergraduate and graduate in Kenya. In particular, the survey showed how the technology has transformed the way the students generate/access and comment information within the context of media convergence. Of particular interest was how the students tapped into the now popular electronic money transfer system (M-Pesa) for daily business transactions. Will the mobile telephony change the way Kenyans do business? Are the students already engaging in business transactions? These and other questions were addressed in the study.

Culture has a dialectical relationship with language. As the cell phone transforms the manner

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