

Mobile phones, popular media and everyday African democracy: transmissions and transgressions

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The revolution shall not be tweeted.

This, in any case, is the controversial opinion of the journalist Malcolm Gladwell (alluding, of course, to Gil Scott-Heron’s song “The Revolution will not be Televised”) (Gladwell 2010). In his *New Yorker* piece that overnight became a bone of contention on social networks worldwide (in itself perhaps a significant response), he pointed to the civil-rights protests in the American South in the 1960s that started with a sit-in at a diner and ended by engulfing the South for a decade. These protests, he insists, “happened without e-mail, texting, Facebook, or Twitter.” But does this mean that the movement would *not* have happened if the students in Greensboro, North Carolina had mobile phones? Would they have used their 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 mobilising 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 Maputo recently (BBC 2010)?

The effectiveness of new media technologies to bring about social change is highly contested. In the one corner, we find the naysayers like Gladwell who dismiss new media activism as based on weak ties and therefore can only demand low-risk participation. Because networks are not hierarchically organized, they are leaderless and can’t think strategically. He claims that “we seem to have forgotten what

activism is”. In the other corner, activists like those who have contributed to 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:x1), 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). And try telling Cheng Jianping, the Chinese woman sent to a labour 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), that there are no risks involved even in humorous exchanges along weak-tie networks.

When it comes to Africa, the contribution of ICTs, of which mobile phones form a part, to development and democracy has been widely debated (Hahn & Kibora 2008:88). Consensus has not yet 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 like the political economy of access, or 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: 659), to describe the “revolution” in Africa, might remind us that mobile phones have shaped the communications landscape much more rapidly than in Europe (Hahn & Kibora 2008:88). In Africa, mobile phones are “almost always the cheapest and quickest way to communicate” (Etzo & Collender 2010: 659), because this technology does not require a network of landlines, which is often

absent or inadequate in Africa (Ekine 2010x). 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:xvii). The figures, indeed, are astounding. There are more than 350 million mobile phone subscribers on the continent, representing an exponential 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 2010:660). (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. The impact of mobile telephones on economic growth in developing countries has been found to be double that of rich countries - a developing country with on average 10 or more mobiles per 100 people has been shown to have a 0.59 percent higher growth in GDP than a country that is identical in all other respects (Etzo & Collender 2010:662).

These mobile optimists point out that phones are used for much more than making calls. There are “1001 uses” (Berger 2008) of cellphones 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, send and receive public health or emergency messages (through services such as Ushahidi or Frontline SMS). But apart from these more ‘serious’ uses of mobiles, Africans use mobiles in everyday life to take photographs, make films, watch television (Berger 2010) search the Internet and, yes, to Facebook and to tweet (Berger 2008, FreedomFone 2010, Smith 2008, Etzo & Collender 2010). The range of functionalities of mobile phones make it an “extremely versatile technology” (Ekine 2010: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 is not yet as prevalent in Africa than in the North,

older communication practices like *radio trottoir* are combined with new technologies in novel and creative ways [Mabweazara 2010:14; Nyamnjoh in Wasserman 2009:)]

But history has taught us to take claims of revolutions in Africa with a pinch of salt. During the roughly two decades of research into ICTs in Africa we have often seen initial visions of utopia dissipate, especially as these relate to the intersection between new media and democratic politics. At the outset (from the 1990s onwards), debates about the potential of ICTs – especially the Internet - to widen participation in the public sphere have been marked by optimism and “almost utopian bliss” (Mudhai, Tetey & Banda, 2009: 1). ICTs were seen as heralding a new era for African democracy, and the 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 NMTs. The frog, however, seemed to be less predictable than initially thought. Its movements over the African terrain proved to be dissimilar in so many ways from the media-saturated Global North which inspired this theorizing, that they required a return to older questions about access, inequality, power and quality of information (Mudhai et al. 2009:1).

Sometimes the more recent enthusiasm for mobile phones in Africa bears resonances of the early evangelism around the use of the Internet for democracy in Africa. The excitement generated by mobile phones seems however 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. Phones are also more versatile than older ICTs. Because Internet access is but one of the functions of mobile phones, their success can be measured by more criteria than just how they make good on the earlier promises of the Internet for democracy and development in Africa. Earlier indicators of the Digital Divide, such as Castells’ observation (1998/2010: 94-5) that there were more telephone lines in Tokyo or Manhattan than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa, and that the continent is therefore ‘excluded

from the information technology revolution', have therefore been put under erasure if not made obsolete by the ubiquitous mobile phone.

But, as was the case in earlier ICT discourses, some critics have also issued warnings that mobile telephony is not yet 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 make use of mobile phones, or at least make full use of the capabilities offered by these technologies. They therefore remain either excluded from the mobile sphere or 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 can entrench or exacerbate unequal gendered or classed power relations (Etzo & Collender 2010: 660, 666).

There is no doubt that mobile phones have changed social practices around 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'. The decreased impact of spatial distance on what we may call social, economic and political distances has been well-documented in case studies from around the continent. However, the nature and extent of these changes are not uniform, nor are they equally distributed. High penetration of mobile phones into the market should not automatically be taken as an indication of high *usage* of phones, nor 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 like 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 care-givers (Duncan 2009). These findings mitigate the euphoric notions of mobility, independence and individuality often characterising discourses around

mobile phones in Africa. In celebrating the mobile revolution taking place in Africa, it should not be forgotten that many Africans are still not storming the barricades.

But again 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), 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 interpret such beeps as messages with varied meanings (see Duncan 2009; Etzo & Collender 2010:666).

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: A Paradigm Shift 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:x), or the street vendors in Uganda offering mobile access on a per-call basis (and invite their customers to charge their phones using car batteries [Smith 2010]). African entrepreneurs find creative solutions to provide mobile web content to prepaid users who are not used to paying for internet access and who do not have access to the Internet via PCs (A Rising Tide 2010). Even while these entrepreneurial advances in the provision of internet connectivity are positioning mobile users as consumers rather as citizens or political agents, they display something of the ethnographic understanding of mobile use in Africa that can be extended to other areas such as politics or activism. Instead of inserting the technology into an African context as if the technology itself is inherently transformative and audiences everywhere will respond to it in the same way, these entrepreneurs seek first to understand the users

within a given culture, their needs, their limitations and their everyday lives, and then go out to adapt this technology to suit the context – not the other way around.

It is these examples of creative adoption and adaptation by African users of mobile phones that we should concentrate on when attempting to answer questions regarding the potential of mobile telephones for democratic citizenship and everyday understandings of political participation in Africa. The impressive statistics of penetration, the optimistic projections of future growth or their flipside, the existing divides in take-up figures between countries, between genders or age groups, do not tell us much about how users integrate mobile phones in their everyday life or how they use mobile phones to perform identities, whether civic, social or individual. The problem with concentrating on penetration rates and demographic statistics around the uptake of mobile phones in Africa, is that these figures may not necessarily tell us much about how mobile phones are actually used. Ekine (2010:x) reminds us of how misleading statistics may be, especially in developing contexts such as Africa where media usage may occur in patterns that differ quite radically from those in the Global North. Too often, discourses around mobile phones make a 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 contextualised usage of phones in everyday life, then lead to either over-optimistic 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 emphasizes 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: 31). An assessment of NMT in everyday life will still not tell us the ‘effect’ of NMTs on African politics, but will help us understand how politics, popular culture and media are entwined in ways that form circuits and pathways below the highways.

If the focus falls on mobile phones as tools rather than on the people using them, we have to either conclude that a revolution is at hand or that we are about to succumb to imperialism – because tools are counted and their effect projected. Where mobile phones are studied primarily as technologies in themselves, with effects on society that may be quantitatively measured and related to access rates, the danger of technological determinism lurks. This is especially true when mobile phones' effects on political participation, whether mainstream or alternative, is deduced from their rapid uptake and wide spread. Malcolm Gladwell's poignant critique of social networking for political action applies in fact a critique of a technologically determinist view of political and social change: "Where activists were once defined by their causes", Gladwell (2010) claims, "they are now defined by their tools". Manji (2008:130) warns specifically about the dangers of technological determinism in the claims made about the potential of mobile phones for democracy and development, arguing instead for a focus on the power relations into which they are introduced:

Why are we not holding conferences about the role of the pencil in development? Or the role of paper? There is more evidence of social progress made by these humble instruments than all the information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last 20 years. Pencils and paper can be used to write tracts such as the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *The Wretched of the Earth*. However, they are also used to write *Mein Kampf*. There is nothing intrinsically progressive about the pencil or paper. It depends on who uses it and for what purpose.

The problem seems to come in as a result of the rush to celebrate new technologies as messianic and predicting their direct transformative effects on democracy and development in Africa. Such a view of the radical newness of new technologies like the mobile phone is problematic although widespread. Viewing ICTs as presenting a complete break with the past firstly ignores or neglects the way in which old and new media converge – e.g. how SMS's with live updates about elections or conflicts have been sent to radio stations from Ghana to Burundi to DRC to broadcast to a wider audience (Myers 2008:26), how citizen journalists in on the Indaba Ziyafika project in Grahamstown send reports or photographs via SMS/MMS to the town

newspaper, or how a third of mobile phone users in Zambia use it to listen to the radio (Montez 2010).

The view of mobiles as radically new technologies that will revolutionize African societies may also be predicated on a patronising ideological assumption of Northern technological progress as a benevolent force for the ‘underdeveloped’ South (Mabweazara 2010: 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 contextualised understanding of mobile phone use in Africa and its convergence with other forms of communication (see e.g. De Bruijn et al. 2009; Willems 2010) 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. We need more non-reductionist analyses that steer a path between the Scylla and Charybdis of technical and social determinism (cf Ling 2004:23) to provide us with a picture of mobile phones in Africa that are rich, textured and varied. We need rich, textured, immersive perspectives; not sweeping rhetorical claims about revolutions or counter-revolutions.

Where the transmission model 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-centred* model is concerned with what happens to *people* when mobile phones are used to *transmit* information to them, the *context-centred* model is more interested in what happens to the *technology* when it is appropriated and adapted *by* people - people that 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 made us aware that neither technology or society should be taken as

over-determining but should be seen as mutually implicated (cf Goggins 2006:11; Mabweazara 2010:19). The domestication approach (Ling 2004:26) 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 in everyday democratic politics in Africa. In their study of the domestication of mobile phones in Burkina Faso, Hahn & Kibora (2008) have illustrated how mobiles can be understood also not just in terms of the functionality of communication, but as “material objects with a particular social and economic embedding.”

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: 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? Indeed, will the revolution be tweeted/texted/mixed?

Perhaps the very question of whether the “revolution shall be tweeted” – whether there is a connection between popular media platforms, everyday life and political participation – relies on 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 2006:4). 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 (cf 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 centres) 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 it. It therefore makes more sense to think not 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 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 2006:2-3). 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" (Goggins 2006:14). For instance, to what extent do social and material circumstances in Africa militate against the "mobility, portability, and customisation" (Goggin 2006:2) promised by mobile phones?

How does this transmission and transgression take place? Let me end by highlighting some of the themes to be discussed in this workshop to try and illustrate the type of questions we should be asking if we consider the influence of mobile phones on political life in Africa as both transmission and transgression:

- *State and media:*

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 conflictual one. Too often it has been accepted that the revolution will not be televised because of state influence in or control over the airwaves, and the alignment between business interests and political power in the press. The advent of ICTs, especially mobile phones, has been seen as providing avenues for “e-democracy”, where governments or political parties could communicate more effectively with the citizenry. Mobile phones are seen as vehicles to provide information to the electorate to enable them to exercise a rational choice, or 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 ANC to host political information, the social network Mig33, hosted in the US, did provide a platform for political information (Walton & Donner 2010). In other African countries, mobile phones are used as tools of surveillance, for citizens to monitor political processes, for instance during the elections in Ghana in 2008, where monitors would send SMS’s to an operational centre operated by CODEO, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (Verclas 2008). The award-winning 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.usahidi.com/index.php/category/elections/>).

These type 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 2010). The mobilization of counterpublics via mobile phones seem to be successful for amplifying a brief

political campaign or event, but less successful in ensuring “ongoing and higher levels of accountability” (Walton & Donner 2010). For the deepening of democracy in Africa, surveillance of government also has to happen in-between the ‘ritual of elections’ (Willems 2010b), e.g. through ongoing social movement and civil society campaigns. Mobile phones have proved useful to social movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa, for instance. 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.

But we also need to ask broader questions than just the instrumentalist ones about the relative success or failure of the information *transmitted* in e-democracy campaigns. We should also direct our attention to how mobile phones become platforms for expressions of the political dimensions of popular culture (Willems 2010b). The use of mobile phones to spread rumours during elections can either be seen as a breakdown of the rational deliberation (Walton & Donner 2010), or, as Willems (2010a: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, rumours, jokes and “SMS Wars” (Walton & Donner 2010) via mobiles can be seen as the latest incarnation of the well-known *radio trottoir* (Ellis 1989:321), the popular and unofficial medium of discussion of political affairs in Africa. Political rumours, 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 programmes and social network 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 programmes like *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 than via the formal hallmarks of liberal democracy. They suggest that we should be attentive to the fact 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 have to be taken seriously when we try to understand the implications of mobile phones for political processes in Africa.

- *ICT and local politics*

Practices like 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 should not be confused with the *practice* of citizenship, as Steenveld & Strelitz (2010) remind us. 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 2009:132). This means that the Habermasian ideal of rational deliberation, as claimed by the mainstream media, are in practice often eschewed in favour 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 rather 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 Bakhtinian fashion and actively enter political life on their own terms (Steenveld & Strelitz 2010, cf. Robins et al. 2008:1072).

When we therefore 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 non-participation” (cf Robins, Cornwall & Von Lieres 2008:1072) 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 (cf 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 NGOs who want to establish a rational, liberal democracy in Africa, but that is a real form of political engagement in African societies, stemming from historical relations of power between subjects and the state, and is a function of the continued exclusions and marginalisations in post-colonial Africa (Robins et al. 2008: 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 et al. 2008:1080).

- *Technology development/knowledge and society/ICT and entrepreneurship, daily life*

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: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 that small entrepreneurs running businesses from day to day. The personal economies of individuals in Africa is 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.

But 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 criss-cross 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 *active* consumers. As Etzo & Collender (2010) 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."

Participation in this informal economy requires perhaps a different kind of technology knowledge than the knowledge NGOs and development agencies envisage 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 favours, how to use Bluetooth functionality to swop 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 & Kibora (2008:94-96) observed in Burkina Faso, where mobile phones have become an “integral part of social life”. These practices are worth quoting at length:

For example, people started to exchange mobile phone numbers, even if they did not plan to call the other person in the immediate future. Also flashing and beeping (also see elsewhere note made) The expanding business with telephone cards generates new job opportunities for many young unemployed people, who earn their living by selling the cards on the roadside, in bars or in restaurants. Selling cards

in one’s neighbourhood is also very popular among pupils during their summer holidays. The appropriation of the mobile phone in Burkina Faso is not restricted to its adaptations at the social and economic level.

Modifications occur

in the technical domain as well, even if this is only possible to a limited degree. One of the most frequent features of this kind of adaptation, which applies to many technical devices in Africa, is the extension of its usage beyond the general life expectancy of the device in question. This particular usage of devices in Africa is best described by the term ‘second life One particular

expertise of these young people is the ‘decoding’ of mobile phones, since those bought at cheaply in France are generally ‘coded’ in order to restrict their use to the network of one particular operator. Secondhand phone dealers importing their goods to Burkina Faso soon found a solution to by-pass this ‘coding’. (Hahn & Kibora 2008:94-96)

Apart from economic capital, mobile phones also provide social capital. Southwood (2008: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.

- *Calling in/from Africa*

Mobile phones are generally taken to be “freedom-enhancing” (Sen 2010:2) 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 2007:176). 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 and decrease distance and make Africans participants in the processes of globalization. However, studies have also 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 200: 89-90).

Does this preference for using mobile phones to establish and maintain private networks – whether fragmented, weak-tie networks or family the preference 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 2005:23), how should we ‘read’ the immense popularity of social networking sites like Mxit (with its 20 million users and more messages sent daily than the total global Tweets [MyBroadband 2010] in political terms? As a lamentable form of disengagement from formal politics (see Walton & Donner 2010), 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 like 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 like Mxit and 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/women¹. 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 have implications for political participation. Political positions are often articulated via race or ethnicity (as recent history in South Africa and Kenya, to name but two postcolonial African settings, will attest). If we are to explore the implications of mobile telephones for political participation in Africa, the paradoxes of transgression and fixity in mobile identity discourses should not be relegated to the realm of the private, but explored for what they say about the political as well.

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 2004:28). Such an approach would typically

eschew the grand claims of impact and effect associated with technologically determinist models. But at the same time 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 democratisation 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. By establishing these links, 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 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' (cf 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.

Seeing as we are meeting in Leiden, perhaps the Dutch poet Remco Campert's words are appropriate for this approach: *Verzet begint niet met grote woorden maar met kleine daden*. Or, loosely translated in Gladwell's idiom: "The revolution will not start with big words but with small deeds".

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¹ I owe this insight to my colleague Alette Schoon