Book Review

Mobilizing African Publics

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Ekine, Sokari. (Ed.) *SMS Uprising: Mobile Phone Activism in Africa.*
Cape Town: Pambazuka Press, 2009, 174 pp., ISBN-10: 1906387354,
ISBN-13: 978-1906387358, $18.66 (paperback).

Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Inge Brinkman. *Mobile Phones:
The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa,* edited by Bamenda,
Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group (RPCIG) and
Leiden, African Studies Centre, 2009, 184 pp., $18.66 (paperback).

Two recent edited volumes make contributions to the study of mobile
communications in Africa. Sokari Ekine's *SMS Uprising: Mobile Activism in
Africa* is a collection of reports on innovative mobile activism and advo-
cacy projects in Africa, sketched against a backdrop of the political econ-
omy of the continent's mobile communications industry. Another
collection, *Mobile phones: The new talking drums of everyday Africa,*
shifts the focus from mobile activism to broader ethnographic accounts of
how phone users in Africa adapt technologies to their everyday lives and
ways of speaking, showing how new communicative designs are woven
from local thread.

The activists' accounts in *SMS Uprising* point to the significance of
existing local infrastructure and communicative practices in mobile cam-
paigns, while the ethnographic studies reveal the complexities of access-
ing the evolving meanings of these local practices. Mobile activists
develop "Mobiles in-a-box" guides and resource kits that are intended for
use across contexts, while ethnography unpacks the specific uses of
phones in particular contexts, revealing the lived meanings of mobile com-
munication in Africa, the fluidity of phones as locally interpreted artifacts,
and the strength and flexibility of cultural forms on the African "mobile
margins."

SMS Uprising

SMS Uprising targets a broad audience, and it includes an accessible and
often inspiring collection of practitioner accounts, as well as guidelines for
practice and reflection. The collection is edited by activist Sokari Ekine
(from the award-winning blog Black Looks[1]) and includes chapters pro-
vided by leading figures who have shaped the tools and campaigns used
in the first decade since mobile communication became more broadly
accessible across most of the continent. Contributors include Juliana
Rotich from Ushahidi, Berna Ngolobe of WOUGNET (Women of Uganda
Network, one of the oldest African NGOs working with women and ICTs),
Ken Banks from Frontline SMS, and "maptivist" Christian Kreutz.

The *SMS Uprising* of the title refers to a potential, rather than an

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1. *http://www.blacklooks.org*

actual mobilization, with most case studies reporting small-scale projects by NGOs across Sub-Saharan Africa using SMS for activism and advocacy. On the whole, these projects lack the drama of the popular uprisings and revolutions which swept North Africa and the Middle East in early 2011, popularly labeled "Facebook revolutions" because of the prominent role played by social networking sites in both mobilization and government responses. They do show the sustained work and ingenuity required to embed mobile technology in day-to-day activism in contexts where Facebook or Twitter are inaccessible to most people, and where organizations often do not have access to mass media. The account of the development of crowdsourced crisis-response tool Ushahidi is particularly valuable, given the prominence of this tool in subsequent crisis responses around the globe.

Nathan Eagle gives an overview of the economic and regulatory context where some mobile operators on the continent reap huge profits, regulation seldom serves the public good and governments such as China and Libya use telecommunications to expand their influence. Several case studies show how the cost of mobile communication often effectively prohibits mass participation, even in SMS campaigns. According to Christian Kreutz, the potential contributions of mobile technologies (such as expanding participation in citizen media) are limited (1) by the costs of airtime, which strangles participation in SMS campaigns, and (2) by the cost of handsets, which means that old or low-cost phones are the norm, and thus limits access to other features, such as data and applications. Ken Banks argues for simple, low-cost implementations to support grassroots NGOs and the case studies in the volume also provide ample evidence of the importance of existing modes of activism and accessible, affordable technologies in generating a critical mass of participation.

The collection includes accounts of specific campaigns from Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, DRC, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Uganda. Chapters detail the development of a "Mobiles in-a-box" resource kit for human rights activists (Chapter 4), as well as a discussion of an alternative news source, Kubatana, which uses SMS, email, and audio information distributed via cellphone to counter government censorship in Zimbabwe (Chapter 7). Fifteen countries ratified the Protocol on the Rights of Women in

Africa as a result of Fahamu's pioneering SMS campaigns, and this case study (Chapter 5) shows how small-scale projects can achieve their goals by leveraging media attention.

Joshua Goldstein and Juliana Rotich discuss mass participation in the viral spreading of SMS rumors and hate-speech in the Kenyan election's aftermath. Their account contrasts viral texts which promoted ethnic violence with the collaborative work of Kenyan bloggers whose work supported civil society. The blogging community rallied to fill the gaps created by mass media blackouts and harnessed SMS for civic purposes in the development of the public platform Ushahidi. Ushahidi (which means "testimony" in Swahili) documented the geographical distribution of incidents of violence, allowing those with access to the Web to see a composite map of the unfolding crisis. This tool for aggregating citizen reports created a viable crowdsourcing platform which has subsequently been useful to activists and relief workers in crisis situations around the world.

The opposition implicit between "predatory" uses of mobile communication at the grassroots and the civic action of Kenyan bloggers in Goldstein and Rotich's work demands a more careful theorization of rumor and networked technologies in African politics. At the least, it suggests a need for studies which explore continuities between mobile communication and other appropriations of media in African contexts, both in amplifying rumors and word of mouth, and in bypassing government censorship (see Nyamnjoh, 2005).

Enthusiasts for "Facebook revolutions" seldom ask who is excluded from the networked publics of Web 2.0. Similarly, Goldstein and Rotich draw connections between Kenyan blogs and the democratic promise of Benkler's "networked public sphere," but they leave the specificities of access in this context untheorized. Can the Internet really be counted as a "commons" on a continent where only 10% of the population access online media? Similarly, the constraints and high costs of SMS make the need for accessible online "public spaces" and cheap mobile Internet all the more urgent.

For this reason, a key strength of the collection is the honest account by Anil Naidoo of a failed South African project. The UmNyango SMS campaign provided information about domestic violence and land exclusions and aimed to encourage women to report human rights abuses. While mobile communi-

cation allowed near universal accessibility, local dynamics, such as a reluctance to confide in outsiders and a distrust of SMS, still kept people from acting on information. The SMS campaigns also proved prohibitively expensive for both NGOs and participants, and they generally failed to increase women's participation. Naidoo speculates that other modes of activism could have been more effective: "[H]ad we used the funds for supporting women in other ways to organise and seek redress, the outcome would have been more positive than spending the effort and resources in setting up, administering and sending SMS messages" (p. 84).

Mobile Margins and Talking Drums

The energetic and inventive adoption of cell phones and SMS on Africa's mobile margins is documented in *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa.* This volume's study of grassroots adoption forms a useful contrast with the non-adoption or limited adoption of SMS-based advocacy campaigns and systems reported by some authors in the *SMS Uprising* volume. The ethnographic accounts in *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa* bring evolving ways of communicating into sharper focus through a careful engagement with everyday appropriations of mobile technology in six African countries—Ghana, Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali, and Sudan. Beyond their relevance to activists and campaigners who seek to encourage grassroots adoption, everyday studies such as these provide an important context for scholarly understanding of more dramatic moments, such as contested elections or popular uprisings. The shortcomings of the collection are a reminder of the ongoing need for inter-disciplinary theoretical engagement, engaging both with science and technology studies and with a broader range of African scholarship.

An outcome of a 2006 workshop, the volume is a collaboration between scholars in Leiden and Cameroon. Editors Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Inge Brinkman present a collection of research articles (one in French and the rest in English), many of which situate themselves in the tradition of Horst and Miller's (2006) ethnographic study of mobile telephony in Jamaica. A range of studies illustrate how new uses of ICT arise from existing practices and specific cultural contexts. And

at the same time, these studies suggest the powerful global forces of economy and technological innovation which both shape and stunt use.

The articles all identify "mobile margins," or social spaces created by people's mobility and the dynamism and social flux associated with their marginality, peripheral status, and disconnection in Africa. Given this unifying focus, the collection as a whole could have benefited from a stronger theoretical exploration of appropriation in post-colonial societies. Discussions of African cultural appropriations of Western media now need to be able to account for African positioning in contemporary global networks (see Haupt, 2008), and should also be engaging with social theories of technology, such as domestication and adoption.

Ludovic Kibora's study of SMS use in Burkina Faso documents the mass mobilization of SMS in everyday communication in both urban and rural areas in Africa, despite lack of access to both cell phones and literacy. Discarded phones are recovered from dumps in Europe and imported to Burkina Faso, where they suggest "Frenchness," utility, and business opportunity. Even in remote village communities, SMS scribes are recruited. Written language and asynchronous text messaging are used to bypass costs and difficulties with network access, but traditional norms for oral interaction (such as hierarchical speech) persist. Abbreviated, formulaic French text messages remediate formerly oral interactions, such as arrangements for weddings, funerals, and other social rituals.

An excerpt from Francis Nyamnjoh's novel *Married But Available* (Langaa, 2008) pokes fun at earnest mobile communication researcher Lilly Loveless. The excerpt amusingly portrays a foreign researcher coming to terms with new meanings for mobile communication as she engages people around her and tries to make sense of a fictional African country's unfamiliar and complex social landscape. This playful narrative also provides a space to explore a number of juicy rumors, stereotypes, and tidbits of folk wisdom about mobile phones in Africa.

The self-reflexive tone of the novelistic piece reappears in a discussion of the place of mobile phones in ethnographic methodology. The article is a useful reminder of the fact that mobile phones change the ethnographic toolbox, just as "virtual" methods associated with online communities have

brought about shifts in ethnographic methods. The article highlights how researchers need to accommodate local conventions around phone use, and communication generally, in their use of cell phone interviews, defamiliarization techniques, and ongoing relationships with participants. Given that the volume is the outcome of a collaboration between European and African researchers, it is particularly ironic that this piece assumes that the researcher is foreign and needs to learn local mores. The assumption that communicative patterns will be "local" also reveals a lack of engagement with other research into mobile communication, which identifies continuities between resource-constrained communities both globally and within African contexts (see Donner, 2007).

A key contribution of the volume is to break the pro-user bias (Satchell & Dourish, 2009) that is present in much ICT4D research. The majority of people in Africa (59%) are still non-users (ITU, 2010) of mobile phones. Although these non-users may not appear particularly newsworthy or remarkable, they nonetheless present an equally important group of research participants, particularly given the fact that mobile communication diffuses from center to periphery. For example, Thomas Molony's fascinating non-user study of a trader who is notorious for refusing to use a mobile phone suggests the social importance of face-to-face contact in areas where transport is particularly difficult, and where the trader controls information, manages social relationships, and benefits from indebted farmers' limited agency and inability to sell their goods elsewhere.

The distance between the practices documented in this collection and the North African "Facebook revolutions" is a clear reminder of how much research into a wider range of African contexts is needed—both into contexts with far higher mobile diffusion and access to mobile Internet, and into countries with extremely low levels of diffusion. These contexts are likely to present very different pictures from those documented in this volume. It remains to be seen whether the vast diversity of use and social contexts on the continent all belong to one "mobile phone culture," as the editors of this volume claim. At any rate, any singular "mobile phone culture" is likely to diversify rapidly in the next decade, as new mobile technologies shift many people toward converged media and social networking.

In conclusion, these two volumes, considered together and in relation to the current wave of change in North Africa, raise many new questions and highlight new areas of inquiry for researchers. These include the distinctive nature of mobile and mobilized publics, the shifts currently taking place as mobile communication converges with the Internet, and the extent to which the social changes accompanying and resulting from uneven adoption of mobile communication may lead to increased levels of exclusion and inequality, as well as to enhanced participation. ∎

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