

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/>



This is the author's version published as:

Watson, Amanda H. A. (2010) *Review of de Bruijn, M., F. Nyamnjoh and I. Brinkman (eds.). 2009. Mobile phones : the new talking drums of everyday Africa.* Australian Journal of Communication, 37(2), pp. 123-126.

Copyright 2010 University of Queensland

Book Review: *Mobile Phones: The New Talking Drums of Everyday Africa*, edited by Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman, Langaa, Cameroon and African Studies Centre, The Netherlands, 2009. ISBN: 9956-558-53-2. Reviewed by Amanda H A Watson, Queensland University of Technology.

Since the late 1990s, there has been great enthusiasm expressed about the positive impact that can be obtained for poor and disadvantaged people from information and communication technologies (ICTs). This school of thought among researchers and practitioners is identified as ICTs for development (ICT4D). By contrast, a growing number of researchers eschew the technologically deterministic nature of the claims being made for development progress and seek to understand the role of technology in people's lives, primarily through ethnographic studies. This book, which focuses on mobile telephony on the African continent, fits into the latter body of literature, with several authors explicitly stating they are examining social and cultural settings and are not taking a technologically deterministic view. The book captures the diverse ways various communities are using this communication technology. It adds to the burgeoning field of mobile phone studies, in which an increasing number of studies is emerging from developing countries.

Opening in an innovative manner, the book commences with an excerpt from a novel by Francis B. Nyamnjoh. This may catch some academic readers off guard, but most readers would be quickly drawn into the scene, in which a young woman has accidentally left her mobile phone in a taxi. The novel excerpt is short and allows the book's editors to present an imagined reality in which mobile phones exist in people's lives in stereotypical or unexpected ways. For example, a story is relayed of criminals who used their mobile phones to coordinate a roadside robbery. These fictional circumstances allow the reader to consider the varied uses of mobile phones.

The introduction discusses the novel excerpt and explains its relevance. The book's editors suggest "Africa's communication landscape has undergone tremendous change since the introduction of mobile telephony" (p. 11), and detail the rapid increase in mobile phone penetration over the last decade. They furthermore suggest that in Africa "the changes induced by the mobile phone are remarkable" (p. 17).

The second chapter, by Lotte Pelckmans, is unusual as it looks at the advantages and disadvantages of mobile phone use by researchers. In particular, it explores anthropologists' use of this device to keep in touch with loved ones at home while they are in the field. It questions whether this change makes the field researcher more emotionally stable and therefore better suited to the work, or conversely whether it makes them less engaged with the new culture.

In Chapter Three, Walter Gam Nkwi examines the role of the mobile phone in a university town in Cameroon. In keeping with later chapters in the book, this chapter reminds the reader that mobile telephony is generally viewed as a positive development, and therefore there is a need for research which does not commence from a biased standpoint. Nkwi asserts that “society shapes the technology as much as the technology shapes society” (p. 51). He includes a useful history of phones in this town (dating back to the first use of the telegraph in 1893), but focuses on present-day use of ‘call boxes’ (small businesses which offer competitive rates for mobile phone calls), painting the scene vividly and clearly.

Young students in Sudan are the research subjects in Chapter Four, by Inge Brinkman, Mirjam de Bruijn and Hisham Bilal. Gender issues are also explored, such as the use of the mobile phone in courtship and in women’s businesses. Once again, the authors are interested in social responses to mobile telephony. Although the authors highlight some interesting uses of the mobile phone, they acknowledge its impact is limited: “the mobile phone is not a ‘revolutionary’ factor in Sudanese society: it largely confirms existing inequalities” (p. 87). Chapter Five presents research by Thomas Molony into the experience of farmers in Tanzania who grow perishable foods like tomatoes and potatoes. Unlike the economic benefits of mobile telephony anticipated by ICT4D advocates, Molony concludes the mobile phone is of limited benefit as the farmers “have little choice but to accept the price they are given” (p. 107).

In a book which is otherwise written in English, it is surprising to find a chapter presented in French. Ludovic Kibora looks at text messaging in the oral culture of Burkina Faso. He emphasises the very low level of landline telephone penetration and the explosion of mobile phone use after the addition of commercial providers to the market since 2000. Voice communication appears to sit well in a country where the oral tradition is strongly embedded. A brief but very specific study of the use of the mobile phone by a traditional healer in Cameroon is contributed by Wouter van Beek. Related to local beliefs about the transmission of illness, the author suggests the mobile phone helps the healer to maintain safety through physical distance from the patient. The photographs in the chapter assist the reader’s comprehension of the healer’s practices.

Julia Pfaff’s contribution tracks an actual mobile phone handset; a research practice termed “object geography” (p. 147). Without being technology-centred, Pfaff presents mobile phone-related behaviours by profiling the individuals who bought, owned, used and sold that one handset in Tanzania. The final chapter, by Jenna Burrell, is not specifically about mobile phones. It portrays Internet cafe use amongst young people in Ghana. Burrell does mention mobile phones, but these references are very minor. Given that this is the final chapter, it is a surprising conclusion to a book which has otherwise focused quite specifically on the technology referred to in the book’s title.

Overall, this is a valuable book for readers interested in the contemporary role of mobile telephony in the lives of poor people in developing countries. It would have been enhanced by a concluding chapter which could have drawn together the disparate pieces of research presented to synthesise themes and explain what it means for the African context and communication research more generally. This conclusion could also have explained more clearly the concept of societies influencing technology and could have pinpointed specific examples from the earlier chapters. Whatever the tensions between the technology-driven and ethnographic approaches, the evidence in this book supports the view on both sides that very important and fundamental changes are underway. Some themes clearly emerge, such as: astoundingly wide uptake compared to previous modern communication technologies; questions of the economic impact; potential uses emerging in social relations like courtship and also in crime, and adaptation of the mode of communication to traditions like an oral culture. It was disappointing that there was no specific reference to the 'talking drums' of the title: is there research which shows that Africans compare the mobile phone to traditional communication techniques? Nonetheless, this is a worthy book which highlights the cultural uses of communication technologies, and counters some of the inflated expectations about such technologies solving a range of social issues.