

This article was downloaded by:

On: 15 December 2009

Access details: *Access Details: Free Access*

Publisher *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Development in Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713412875>

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To cite this Article Goggin, Gerard and Clark, Jacqueline(2009) 'Mobile phones and community development: a contact zone between media and citizenship', *Development in Practice*, 19: 4, 585 – 597

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09614520902866371

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09614520902866371>

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Mobile phones and community development: a contact zone between media and citizenship

Gerard Goggin and Jacqueline Clark

Mobile phones have already been used widely around the world for activism, social and economic development, and new cultural and communicative forms. Despite this widespread use of mobile phones, they remain a relatively un-theorised and un-discussed phenomenon in community and citizen's media. This paper considers how mobile phones have been taken up by citizens to create new forms of expression and power. The specific focus is the use of mobile phones in community development, with examples including the Grameenphone, agriculture and markets, the Filipino diasporic community, HIV/AIDS healthcare, and mobile phones in activism and as media. It is argued that mobile phones form a contact zone between traditional concepts of community and citizen media, on the one hand, and emerging movements in citizenship, democracy, governance, and development, on the other hand.

KEY WORDS: Technology; Social sector; Rights

Introduction

Mobile phones have already been used widely around the world for activism, social and economic development, and new cultural and communicative forms. This is perhaps not so surprising: there are more mobile phones than fixed-line telephones around the world, and in developing countries, cell phones are often the effective and relatively affordable form of telecommunications access.

Mobile phones often enable regular contact between families and friends dispersed across the world, extending and maintaining community despite forced or voluntary migration (and the isolation associated with the high cost of the traditional landline or non-existence of the landline due to lack of infrastructure or damage). In addition, features of mobile-phone culture (such as text messaging) have been widely taken up across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, as well as elsewhere. Further, mobile and wireless technologies provide online platforms for many citizens, where computer and Internet access remain out of reach.

Despite this widespread use of mobile phones, they remain a relatively un-theorised and un-discussed phenomenon in community and citizens' media. Accordingly in this paper, we wish to consider how mobile phones have been taken up by citizens to create new forms of expression and power.

Our specific focus is the use of mobile phones in community development. However, we also wish to urge that mobile phones form a contact zone between traditional concepts of community and citizen media, on the one hand, and emerging movements in citizenship, democracy, governance, and development, on the other hand.

First, we discuss the emergence of the mobile phone, and characterise where it fits into the different spheres of citizen and community media, on the one hand, and development, on the other. Second, we review the use of mobile phones in community development, discussing a range of leading examples (starting with the celebrated case of the use of mobile phones following the model of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, but also looking at healthcare, mobile phones in new relations of citizens living in diasporic, globalised communities, and activism). Third, we discuss what is specific about mobile phones in the social dynamics of community development. In conclusion, we consider the implications of such understandings of mobile phones for developing accounts of citizen media – especially given the strategically important place they have in contemporary transformations in digital media and communications.

The emergence of mobile phones

A premise of the collection of papers that make up this special issue of *Development in Practice* is that while there is great excitement, innovation, and energy in community and citizen's media, these developments are not well recognised outside the media community; furthermore, the potential of such a movement in media is not well recognised or understood by development practitioners, activists, or scholars – especially because communication is often framed in quite narrow ways. The case of the mobile phone complicates this situation, because it is an area of media in which there has been a great deal of excitement from the community-development sector. Indeed, the case of mobile phones offers excellent prospects to bridge the archetypal gulf between community and citizens' media, on the one hand, and development on the other.

The mobile phone belongs to the world of telecommunications and, as a technology, shares governing features with networks, equipment, and applications, as well as the forms of communication and culture that historically were co-created with telecommunications. However, the mobile phone has its own characteristics that need to be appreciated. First commercially deployed in the late 1970s, the mobile phone has developed its own social functions and its own 'culture'. This mobile-phone culture builds upon that of the telephone, but also, and increasingly, borrows from other media technologies, creating something different again.

At the most basic level, the diffusion of the mobile phone has outstripped that of the fixed-line telephone. In many developing countries, more people own, have access to, or use mobile phones than fixed-line telephones – there is an idea that via mobile phones, people in developing countries have 'leapfrogged' a traditional stage in telephone or telecommunications diffusion. Not requiring customer-access (local-loop) lines, but rather transmitter towers, the economics of mobile phones is different from that of fixed-line telephones – and customer access can be offered more quickly. With the development of new pricing packages and products such as prepaid cards and payment options, mobile phones are being used by the poor as well as the rich. In their account of mobile phones in Mexico, Judith Mariscal and Eugenio Rivera go so far as to speak of mobile phones as a 'propoor service', suggesting that 'mobile telephony has and will continue to provide social benefits, because it is becoming the favoured means of communication for less-privileged segments of the population' (Mariscal and Rivera 2007: 51). There is a touch of hyperbole in this claim, as we note later in the paper, but it certainly catches the flavour of what excites many development practitioners and community-media activists regarding mobile phones.

Furthermore, mobile phones have developed a particular relationship with people, their bodies, and their lives. Mobile phones have become a personal, even intimate technology. They certainly were a domestic technology, even more so than 'personal' computers, laptops, or many other household digital or ubiquitous computing devices. A fixed-line telephone was clearly something installed in a household, place of work, or public place, and shared with others, but a mobile phone could be held and owned by an individual – allowing for new relations of sharing and negotiation. Whereas to broadcast a television or radio programme required significant, expensive transmitter equipment (although a radio receiver or television set might be relatively inexpensive), a mobile phone could both broadcast and receive messages and images courtesy of the telecommunications network. As a communications device, mobile phones have been associated with significant social transformations; as a media device, mobile phones are now vying with the other old and new media technologies.

Two further things are noteworthy here regarding mobile phones as media: first, across the world, mobile phones are more significant than the Internet in many regards, and mobile phones are the way that many people access the Internet; second, mobile phones are often joined up or connected to other media, to create new forms of connection and cultural expression – as the example of camera-phone-generated content appearing on, for example, YouTube illustrates. Since the mid-1980s, community and citizens' media around the world have been radically and luminously extended with new social, cultural, economic, and technological developments associated with video camcorders, personal computers, computer networking and the Internet, free, libre, and open-source movements, and now creative commons. The mobile phone is taking its place in the imagining of citizen media.

Mobile phones in community development

There has been much excitement about the possibilities of mobile phones in development broadly, and in community development in particular. While it is outside of the scope of this paper to fully catalogue and evaluate all instances, we have chosen a number of case studies to discuss leading instances of where mobile phones are featuring in community-development practice – and also to suggest the range of uses, and the different implications these can have.

Grameenphone

The Grameen Bank is a micro-credit facility providing small loans without requiring collateral to those who do not have access to traditional lending institutions – especially the poorest of the poor, village women. Started in Bangladesh in 1976, the Grameen Bank is the brainchild of Muhammad Yunus, and it offers a model widely replicated in both developing and developed countries all over the world. Today, 97 per cent of its borrowers are women, a group considered to be the most vulnerable to poverty. The Grameen Bank has long been of interest to those in the development community, especially economists, but also community-development practitioners, especially regarding gender. Indeed, Grameen certainly has attracted its fair share of proselytisers (not least among its founders), and has often been viewed through rose-tinted glasses by Western eyes. However, especially with the advent of the shift from group to individual-tailored lending represented by Grameen II, it has certainly been central to enshrining microfinance as a central plank of development strategies – though its effectiveness as a way to end, rather than alleviate, poverty is still debated.

Grameenphone is also based on the principles of the Grameen Bank. It is a joint venture enterprise between Telenor, the dominant Norwegian telecommunications company, and Grameen Telecom Corporation, a non-profit sister concern of the Grameen Bank (Grameenphone 2006).

Launched in 1997, Grameenphone was initiated by Iqbal Quadir, a Bangladeshi educated in the USA. Quadir had an 'epiphany' when his computer crashed one morning working in venture capital on Wall Street (Sullivan 2007: xviii). He suggested to Yunus that a mobile phone was no different to a cow. It could equally help the very poor escape the poverty cycle. Yunus agreed to lend money to women with a credit history to buy a phone, and so the Village Phone Program was created. In this Program, 'phone ladies' lease phone time to villagers, using the income to pay back their loan in the same way they had sold the milk from their cows to repay loans. The village phone ladies make an average of \$750 a year, double the average income in Bangladesh (Sullivan 2007: xviii).

As of December 2007, Grameenphone claimed 16.5 million subscribers. According to International Telecommunications Union figures for 2007, Bangladesh had over 34 million mobile-phone subscribers, or 21.66 mobile services per 100 subscribers (ITU 2008b). By way of comparison, in 2007 there were a little over one million fixed-line telephone subscribers in Bangladesh, or 0.75 telephone lines per 100 subscribers (ITU 2008a).

Part of the attraction of Grameenphone is its potential as a model for a bottom-up, technology-empowered approach to development. It does appear that the use of the mobile phone by Grameenphone has made a significant contribution to community development (Moni and Uddin 2005; Richardson *et al.* 2000). First and foremost, there is the multiplier effect of the phone ladies' income, which has the potential to ripple throughout their villages, impacting positively on economic and social development. Second, there is a set of associations around technology in particular, and the benefits it confers upon the owner. Third, there are the particular issues regarding gender, accentuated by the way that mobile phones have been deployed, especially through the Village Phone Program.

In terms of understanding the intersection between mobile phones and community development, the role of local understanding and ownership of needs once again emerges as critical. There is a long-standing problem of technology deployment and design in development, whereby technology is given to, or imposed upon, people without due regard to their needs and cultures. This has long been critiqued, with the general recognition in community development that unless the initiative comes from the community it is unlikely to be sustainable. From the standpoint of science and technological studies, there has come the recognition of the role of users, and social, cultural, and political factors in 'shaping' technology (Haddon *et al.* 2005).

Here it can be observed that the 'success' of Grameenphone does appear to come from its framing and implementation by the local national, regional, and community actors – here following the example of the Grameen Bank itself. The Grameenphone model has been replicated in other countries around the world, including Nigeria, Rwanda, and Uganda (Sullivan 2007: 107). 'Cell phones are no longer a statement of wealth ... they are a part of life' (Motlana, quoted in Sullivan 2007: 110).

We have dwelt upon the example of the Grameenphone because it extends the much-discussed principles of the Grameen Bank into the area of mobile phones. It is an early example of how mobile phones have figured in development, building on a long tradition of community and local telecommunications cooperatives and initiatives (see also Galperin and Bar 2007). Until fairly recently, Grameenphone has not focused so much upon the new information, communications, and media capabilities of mobile phones, as they have developed in the last few years. This is changing: in January 2008, Grameenphone launched the Blackberry, aimed at the Bangladesh business market. There are all sorts of questions, of course, about how these kinds of new mobile Internet and media technologies are made available to a wide range of users, not least poor users, which we will touch upon later.

Mobile phones and market information: agriculture and the market spy

There is a burgeoning literature on mobile phones and economic development, especially in relation to microenterprises (businesses with five or fewer employees). The most systematic analysis of this sector has been offered by Jonathon Donner, who in a Rwandan case study found that 'mobiles are allowing microentrepreneurs – particularly those for whom the mobile is the first and only telephone – to develop new business contacts' (Donner 2007: 4).

In other areas of economic development that affect low-income groups, mobile phones are also having an important impact – for instance, in agriculture where the implications of the mobile phone for poor farmers in developing countries can be extraordinary. One important aspect of this is the use of the mobile phone to find information on the market that was previously difficult for small-scale farmers to obtain. Here, the mobile phone can provide producers with information and knowledge on the correct market price, quantities, and availability of a particular product; as well as technical advice. It can enable the producer to have direct communication with the buyer and to avoid the costs associated with intermediaries.

Some notable examples include coffee farmers in Côte d'Ivoire who share mobile phones to check on the hourly fluctuations of coffee and cocoa prices on the international market. Similarly, Indian fisherfolk use mobile phones to decide where best to land with their catch. Another interesting scenario is the emergence of the '*shu shu shu*' or 'market spy' in Tanzania. Here farmers are employing the so-called market spies in nearby cities to relay the latest product prices and availabilities to them by mobile phone (IFAD 2007). Such timely information can enable improved market access, improved profits, and ensure awareness of changing market trends and new opportunities.

The market spy is just one element of The First Mile Project in Tanzania, established in 2005 by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) with the support of the Swiss Government. This project brings together small-scale farmers, traders, processors, and others in the rural sector to learn about and develop strategies to optimise their relevant local knowledge and experience to better meet their identified needs (IFAD n.d.). While the mobile phone, together with e-mail and the Internet, is an integral tool in this process, success is contingent upon farmers and others working together, trusting, collaborating, and sharing their experiences in order to develop better ways of working and increasing their incomes. Future plans of the First Mile Project include the establishment of an online database of 'locally relevant market intelligence' accessible via short message service (SMS) (IFAD 2007).

Of course, it is important to note here practical issues that play a critical role in how mobile phones work in development. For instance, in their discussion of rural knowledge centres – which include a range of information and communications technologies, including mobile phones – Asaba and colleagues highlight the importance of factors such as access to accurate and timely information, management of the information, and capacity to respond to community enquiries (Asaba *et al.* 2006: 150).

Nonetheless, in community-development terms, the mobile phone has the potential to have a positive impact on poor farmers and their communities, through its use to strengthen their position in the market chain. From the perspective of a rights-based approach to development, the mobile phone is an ideal tool to facilitate active citizen participation in development (HRCA 2001: 29), as the grower gains a degree of agency and control hitherto unattainable. In the terms of Amartya Sen, this might be seen as 'the instrumental effectiveness of freedoms of particular kinds to promote freedoms of other kinds' (Sen 1999: xii). Sen's work is especially apposite here as he argues that without the freedom to participate freely in the economy, other rights lack sufficient foundation.

Health and community

An important area where mobile phones are involved in social innovation (Mulgan 2006) is health. The mobile phone is now increasingly becoming a vital tool for the effective delivery of healthcare in developing countries. This is most notable in remote areas with little infrastructure.

A good example is Consol Homes Orphan Care, a community-based healthcare model in Malawi, established in 2000, which enables locally-mobilised community members to support children and adults infected with HIV and/or affected by AIDS. The community carers each support hundreds of households with a sick family member, offering help with basic care, cleaning, counselling, nutrition, and referrals to hospitals and clinics. The different communities and centres are linked by a Zone Manager who travels (often by bicycle) to visit homes or centres, or to send a message from a public computer. Until 2007, Consol Homes had just four mobile phones, but no one at village level had one. In some cases, volunteers had to travel 20–30 km by bicycle each way to send a message. In 2007, one of the Consol Home's supporters, the Stephen Lewis Foundation, funded 15 mobile phones for use by the Zone Managers (Stephen Lewis Foundation, personal communication). A journey which might take all day by bicycle or a delayed e-mail response can now be replaced by a brief call or text on a mobile phone: 'sick persons/children have been saved from imminent disaster surely' (Albert Chapomba, Consol Executive Manager, personal communication). The mobile phone enables the healthcare workers to maximise the use of their time in helping those living with HIV, rather than spending large parts of their day on the road. It has also had other benefits, as Chapomba (personal communication) reports: 'the cell phones that have been given to the Zone Managers have acted as special incentives and units of recognition, since they have also raised the status of the recipients in the communities'.

Other healthcare programmes around the world use the mobile phone as a tool to promote HIV awareness and education: the Heroes Project in India (www.heroesprojectindia.org); the Mexican Zumbido support network enables patients with HIV-related illness to send texts to the network about their daily concerns and challenges; the self-described 'social franchise' Mobile for Good (M4G) project in Kenya uses the mobile phone to provide health information (as well as employment and community updates) to marginalised communities (www.mobile4good.com).

Diasporic, transnational communities

As underlined by the mobile-phone literature, mobile phones are becoming important in social networking in communities across the world, and this provides new opportunities for traditional community-development work to be reconfigured and re-imagined. Mobile phones are an integral component of the constitution of diasporic transnational communities. While they are diverse in their nature, settings, cultural and communicative characteristics and architectures, there is a significant literature on the role of media such as newspapers, radio, video, and now the Internet in sustaining contemporary diasporas (Karim 2003). Although we lack detailed studies regarding the mobile phone specifically, it is widely recognised that the technology plays an important part in the relationships of transnational, diasporic communities. The case we briefly consider here is that of the overseas Filipino worker community.

A high proportion of Filipino citizens work overseas, and make a substantial contribution to the gross national product through their remittances. The official number of overseas Filipino workers reached 1.52 million in September 2006 (National Statistics Office, www.census.gov.ph). Roughly one in three workers was a labourer or unskilled worker; slightly over half of the overseas Filipino workers were female (50.4 per cent); and the females were generally

younger than their male counterparts. The size and nature of the overseas Filipino community has considerable implications for understanding Philippines national identity, family, friendship, and intimate relations, but also the nature of the economy and community developments. We are reminded of our Filipina friend, who has lived and worked overseas for 15 years, telling us that her village, where most of her family still lived, only very recently obtained electricity. To do so, the municipal leaders directly asked family members resident overseas to make founding contributions, to then obtain matching funds, and finally bring electricity to the village.

Philippines is well known as a country where mobile phones are widely used, across all sectors of society. Philippines has been celebrated as the 'text capital' of the world, and text messaging has played an important role in the Filipino diaspora. Overseas Filipino workers have long sent remittances via wire, telegraph, and trading-bank services, and now mobile commerce options have been developed – for instance, the mobile money-transfer service developed by the long-standing business in this area, Western Union, in partnership with leading Philippines wireless provider Smart Communications. This Filipino initiative is part of a strategic initiative by the international mobile-phones body, the GSM Association:

The use of the mobile phone as a sending and receiving mechanism for remittances has the potential to enable low denomination remittances (sub \$100) to be made much more affordable. This will create a new market, driving the accessibility of remittances globally to reach an estimated 1.5–2bn recipients. (GSM Association 2007)

The economic implications of remittances and possibilities of profitably expanding mobile services have tended to feature heavily in the discourse on mobile phones and overseas Filipino workers. However, there is also a potentially very significant role for mobile phones in community development that could better reach this globally dispersed group.

One early example of this is the SOS SMS system for overseas Filipino workers in distress (Figure 1), based in the Centre for Migrant Advocacy, Quezon City, Philippines, and operated and developed by partner NGOs in Saudi Arabia and Australia. The scheme 'gives Government agencies and NGOs the opportunity to respond and/or intervene, in a timely, adequate and



Figure 1: Notice for SOS SMS overseas Filipino scheme

efficient manner, particularly where either the OFW's [Overseas Filipino Worker's] life, safety or well being is a critical consideration' (Centre for Migrant Advocacy 2006). It also allows the collection of information, and development of a database to allow the NGOs operating it to 'develop advocacy thrusts aimed at identifying loopholes in respect of migration attitudes, policies and practices, as well as make recommendations to address them' (Centre for Migrant Advocacy 2006).

Mobile phones are also figuring in transnational, diasporic communities in other ways that have not (to our knowledge) as yet been the subject of systematic community-development initiatives. For instance, Cecilia Uy-Tioco (2007) discusses practices of transnational mothering by mobile messaging by Filipinas living abroad, and so necessarily separated from their family. What emerges clearly in Uy-Tioco's account is that mobile phones are innovatively implicated in the new conditions of global labour, which have an *affective* as well as *economic* character, and that go to the heart of people's lives.

There are many other examples of the mobile phone being intimately and integrally involved in these new global realities. As recently as 2003 in the subsistence-agriculture village of Todos Santos in the remote mountains of Guatemala, there were only two fixed-line telephones. Today, almost every family has a mobile phone, primarily used to keep in touch with family members living and working in the USA – a situation in which Guatemalans and many other Latin Americans are members of two national communities and economies, not to mention their indigenous cultures (Victor Ramírez, personal communication).

There is great potential for innovative community development that responds to the fact that the mobile phone is an important everyday technology for migrant citizens and workers, embedded in diasporic communities and dispersed locations.

Mobile activism

As well as emerging as a new feature of community-development practice, and also in responses to new forms of social organisation, mobile phones have also become important in two further interlinked ways: in activism, and as media. In our final case study, we want to highlight this development, to gain some sense of how it might enlarge conceptions of media and development.

There has been much discussion of the use of mobile phones in dissent and activism, with celebrated examples including the 'coup d'text' that saw mobile phones figured in the people-power protests that toppled Philippine President Joseph Estrada; the use of mobile phones in protests against the World Trade Organization and globalisation; and the possibilities of mobile phones bringing about new forms of spontaneous, collective organisation – 'flash-mobs', or in Howard Rheingold's (2002) influential account, 'smart mobs'. This is now a rich area, if difficult to pin down; here we approach it by discussing the most visible organisation that specialises in mobile activism, MobileActive.org.

MobileActive is a 'community of people and organizations using mobile phones for social impact . . . committed to increasing the effectiveness of NGOs around the world who recognize that the 3.5 billion mobile phones provide unprecedented opportunities for organizing, communications, and service and information delivery' (MobileActive 2008). MobileActive produces strategy guides – available in several languages, including English, Spanish, and Arabic – that cover the use of mobile phones for election monitoring, electoral and voter campaigns, as well as for advocacy and fundraising.

The MobileActive blog provides many examples of mobile phones being used for media. In the area of journalism and news, mobile phones have been an important part of citizen journalism (see the Sri Lanka citizen journalism site Groundviews, now available via mobile,

at groundviews.mofuse.mobi); mobile phones have helped to further develop the tradition of witnessing and human-rights reporting (with concepts such as *sousveillance*, or vigilance from below); mobile phones are being used in other forms of traditional, community media (as, for instance, in the use of SMS for low-income communities in Brazil). In the fast-growing area of social networking, mobile phones are being used to devise new approaches to fundraising.

A distinctive feature of mobile phones as media is their video-camera capability, which – combined with their portability and relative affordability (compared to other forms of digital video) – has seen a wide range of uses from demonstrations, to interviews, to producing advertising for social marketing (in the Nokia-sponsored MTV ‘Switch’ climate-change campaign, mtvswitch.org). Experiments in citizens’ media are following, especially from the coupling of video produced on mobile phones with the vast distribution capabilities of new video-sharing networks and sites such as YouTube and their associated archiving and search technologies.

There is much else to say about the fast-developing activist and media trajectories of mobile phones. Currently there is a great deal of ferment in this field, which is being catalogued and promoted especially by blogs and loosely based networks such as MobileActive. What strikes us about this area is a need to critically evaluate these new possibilities of mobile media, with a sceptical if sympathetic approach to the enthusiastic claims about the technology. It is true that mobile phones have been indispensable in activism, for instance, but the claims of their effectiveness and power are often overstated (as in the case of the role of texting in the Philippines’ ‘coup’). Moreover, as we note later, what is often discussed as the power of mobile phones is actually a mix of other technologies and media, in concert with social and cultural dynamics.

Reflections on the case studies: enhancing community development

The mobile phone is still a relatively new tool in community development for many developing countries. International NGOs have issued senior staff and, in particular, expatriates with mobile phones for many years; however, it is arguably a recent development that grassroots NGOs are exploring the potential for mobile phones to aid them in their work at village level. As the case studies demonstrate, the mobile phone has much to offer community development.

Notably, the mobile phone can enhance community development when the fundamentals of community organisation are in place, as the HIV/AIDS case study illustrates. In the case of the agricultural sector, the mobile phone clearly has much to offer in terms of empowerment of the individual and communities: enabling farmers and producers to participate more effectively and productively in the market chain. Nonetheless, for more innovative strategies promoting economic development to emerge, such as the ‘market spies’ concept, farmers have to work together. The planned SMS access to online databases in Tanzania requires significant investment and collaboration between farmer associations and funders, among others. Sustainable development and active participation in civil society occurs when programmes are driven by the community and meet needs identified by that community. Similarly, the success of the Grameenphone initiative in Bangladesh demonstrates the potential for entrepreneurial activity at village level to drive economic development and improved well-being of communities.

In these contexts, the mobile phone can facilitate the initiation of development strategies by communities, enabling them to access local, regional, national, and global networks – potentially a tool to break down the traditional structures of power that work against the very poor.

That said, we should note that the mobile phone as a development success story is not always a smooth path. It is apparent that an economic base is necessary for the mobile phone to make a contribution to development. It is clear, for instance, that the adoption of mobile phones

depends on having a functional economy of some sort. The so-called village phone ladies in Bangladesh require a credit history with the Grameen Bank to borrow the money necessary to purchase a mobile phone. While this is possible in this setting, elsewhere even these minimal conditions may pose problems.

Take, for instance, the case of internally displaced people (IDPs). In 2000–2001, one of us (Clark) worked with IDPs along the border of Mon State in Burma (Myanmar). Mon State is home to a community of 16,000 IDPs, located on a narrow mosquito-infested strip of jungle on the border with Thailand. There is no land for agriculture (the military do not allow even small gardens) and employment opportunities are non-existent apart from cutting bamboo shoots in the jungle and collecting grasses for broom making.

Many Mon feel forgotten by the wider global community, and express a strong desire for connection with the rest of the world. During the time Clark spent working with Mon, radio was widely listened to, particularly the BBC and Voice of America (VOA). Now it appears, anecdotally at least, that mobile phones have become important, not only for communication, but also for media access, not least news. However, access to mobile phones is difficult for a number of reasons. Compared to the Bangladeshi Grameenphone example, many of the IDPs in Mon State do not possess identity papers, let alone a credit history with a local bank. And then the use of mobile phones is also carefully restricted: in October 2007, for instance, a man who owned a satellite phone was jailed for seven years for the crime of listening to banned international news, including the BBC and VOA (Mon Forum 2007).

Mobile phones are still expensive in many developing countries. This prompts the question of whether those who cannot afford a handset and its associated costs might be falling further behind. In Burma, for example, the options for purchasing a mobile phone are limited to buying an expensive handset from the government or a cheap model if you have access to the Chinese- or Thai-made handsets available along the borders. Many continue to rely on satellite phones, which are an expensive option and which are also banned (Fuller 2008). Nonetheless, the mobile phone has played a critical role in recent political activism in Burma, particularly since the 2008 ban on foreign journalists entering the country.

Finally, we would note that mobile phones also have a dark side, and can be used as a force for attacking human rights and community, as evident in the many cases of death threats by SMS in countries including Peru, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; not to mention the use of mobile phones as activating devices for bombs.

The promise of mobile phones for activating power and voice

There is a strong tendency still in discussions of media and development (as elsewhere) for the novelty and power of particular new technologies to be overemphasised, if not held to be dazzling (Mosco 2004). A poll in February 2008, on the website of the Communication Initiative Network (www.comminet.com), asked readers to nominate which media technology ‘has the most potential for accelerating progress to reduce poverty?’.

While such an exercise doubtless offers some fun and provokes thought, it also frames questions about mobile phones and other media technologies in a way that is still dominant – and not especially helpful. Mobile phones are part of a much larger ecology, or environment, of communication and cultural practices, and media technologies. What is notable about mobile phones, however, is that they loom so large in community development. As such, they offer an opportunity to rethink the power relations of development. That is, rather than simply ‘accelerate’ existing ideas, such as the progressive elimination of poverty, mobile phones might offer the chance for a radical rethink of current, and not especially effective, assumptions.

If we can generalise from the welter of current applications and cases regarding mobile phones, only some of which we have been able to touch upon here, the mobile phone has great potential as a tool in a range of community-development settings. In our discussion we have noted ways in which mobile phones are beginning to figure in strengthening the economic basis of community (such as the Grameenphone, or as 'market spies'), in social networking and civil society (as in MobileActive), in health (the work of Consol Homes), and the empowerment of previously marginalised actors in communities (as in the case of 'village phone ladies'). In addition, mobile phones have taken on an important role in the coordination and communication of workers in community development, as well as their professional position and status (a topic worthy of further discussion).

Over and above that, the mobile phone offers an opportunity for innovative community-development practice that responds to new circumstances, and forges new linkages among global, regional, and local levels. If we take seriously the proposition that the social is made anew alongside new technology, rather than simply one determining or influencing the other, then the mobile phone is an occasion for experimentation and opening up and rethinking community-development practice. Here we think there is great scope for community development to creatively seize the possibilities offered, as is indicated in the case of the overseas Filipino worker and migrant community, with its penchant for mobile phones.

Pushing this line of thought further still, we are only at the inception of grasping mobile phones as media, as devices that now offer many other forms of information, and potential for cultural expression and exchange than simply voice communications or even text messaging. Investment in and attention to mobile media – mobile television, mobile Internet, mobile images, and video – is still primarily concentrated in high-income countries and countries (Europe, Japan, Korea, USA). The majority of new mobile subscribers are now coming from new markets represented by Brazil, China, and India, but also relatively poor countries around the world, and so these users will increasingly figure in how we understand mobile media.

It is quite plausible to call attention to these developments as requiring the reconsideration of citizens' media. What is exciting from our perspective is the real and fertile prospect of the mobile phone offering a 'contact zone' between citizens' media, on the one hand, and community development, on the other. The mobile phone can be taken up in quite practical, everyday ways to communicate and find information – with a palpable and sometimes decisive significance for creating better economic and social opportunities. In this sense, as we have argued, it can be seen as activating important dimensions of human rights in development, building upon and extending the well-recognised contribution of telecommunications. Yet the mobile phone goes further still, along the trajectory of the culturally resonant path of media, playing an important role alongside other convergent and traditional media in bringing new voices, actors, and powerful practices into the circuits of development.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Carol Devine for her assistance with information for this paper.

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