

Mobile Phones and Civic Engagement in Togo

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Research into the impact of new ICT such as mobile phones has become popular recently. There is widespread agreement that the mobile phone has a large impact on society – only the question is which impact, which appears to depend on the context. Our research on the everyday usages of mobile phones in Togo explores the ambiguities hidden behind the slogan of increased connectivity. Communication not only increases in speed (“first we had to travel to the village”), it also brings other ways of relating to the same – and new – others.

This research explores the domains in the public-private continuum in which the mobile phone is an established means of communication. It seems as if there are limits of using mobile phones in trustworthy communication, illustrated by the much-heard utterance “everyone is lying nowadays”. Moreover, people have learned how to adapt their communication patterns to the relatively high communication costs by shifting between providers, carefully planning the schedule and length of their calls and buying airtime.

The research accompanies a development project in which a citizen monitoring and evaluation system is used, based on SMS messages. See [here](#) for an article about the development project. Do new technologies enhance civic engagement? In this context, can we legitimately expect that mobiles enable users to access information and be connected more easily than before? In the exchange of information related to public matters, we consider the experiences of using mobile phones for such communication acts.

Going beyond the perception of the phone only as tool for development, new ICT appears to facilitate people to maintain and strengthen their social networks. They reconfirm their own identity and position vis-à-vis and among their relatives, friends and to their professional pairs. This study considers the mobile phone not only as a technical device as potential for transmitting information, but also looks into ways in which people appropriate it and how it becomes an integral part of their lives.

Through ethnographic fieldwork in Sokodé and other Togolese localities, this research investigates the private and public domains of use and the social contexts in which mobile phones are used. It is of particular importance to get an understanding of the ways people use and perceive mobile phones in different social spheres as digital civic engagement can be identified only by a careful ethnography of everyday usages of new ICT.

