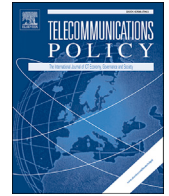


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# Mobile telephony and democracy in Ghana: Interrogating the changing ecology of citizen engagement and political communication

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## A B S T R A C T

This paper explores how far mobile telephony, in concert with other media platforms, has borne out the optimism of the mobile phonedemocracy nexus in the context of Ghana's politics and democratic practice. It examines the relationship between mobile phone access, citizen engagement, and appropriation of the technology by the governing elite for political communication and electoral campaigns. It concludes that Ghana has witnessed a rich convergence of mobile telephony and broadcast media which, in tandem with an open political environment, has significantly transformed the ecology of political communication. This development has helped to deepen democratic engagement among citizens, and between citizens and the political class, by fostering civic vigilance and accountability and facilitating multivocal expression of views from a more diverse constituency of political participants. However, while mobile phones and related platforms have allowed contra- and counter-hegemonic voices in Ghanaian politics to find expression across the electromagnetic spectrum, this access should not be construed to necessarily mean that political discourse has shifted in significant ways as to alter the fundamental structures of political power. Overall, the fundamental structures of political power and the levers of control remain unassailed by ordinary citizens, despite some of the progress made possible by mobile telephony.

## 1. Introduction

The literature is rife with debates about the relationship between new information technologies and politics, with particular attention devoted to the professed, perceived, or potential impact of these innovations on democratic governance (Wasserman, 2011, p. 146; Pătrut and Pătrut 2014). Walton (2007, p. 365) captures part of the debate when he observes that “many futurists, technologists, and democratic theorists have asserted the Internet and modern information technology are enabling the realization of an authentic direct democracy, or at least a more participatory democracy. Conversely, critics contend advances in technology are only automating the existing democracy.” There are also techno-skeptics who do not believe that new technologies are creating any fundamental shifts in the structure, organization and popular involvement in politics to suggest a strengthening of, or expansion in, democratic governance (see Axford, 2011, p. 682). While many of the earlier debates centered on computers and the internet, mobile telephony is fast becoming a focus of analyses. This development is not surprising, given that “the number of mobile phone subscriptions worldwide reached almost 7 billion in 2013” (Chan, 2013, p. 1). Indeed, “use of mobile broadband, mobile Internet, mobile media and wireless technology devices continues to grow” (International Telecommunications Union 2010; Goggin, 2011, pp. 148–149).

In Africa, the rate of diffusion of mobile technologies continues unabated. The continent has seen a significant expansion in cell phone use and services, with Etzo and Collender (2010, p. 659) arguing that “only superlatives seem appropriate to describe the mobile phone ‘revolution’ – its impact and its potential – in Africa” (see also Porter et al., 2012, pp. 145–147; Aker, Collier, & Vincente, 2013, p.

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3). In fact, observers of the cellular phone market agree that the continent is the current global leader in the technology's rate of adoption, with subscription rates outstripping any other region over the last several years (GSM Intelligence, 2015; Winsor, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Bailard, 2009, p. 334). In fact, "the sector contributed \$100bn (£76bn) to sub-Saharan Africa's economy in 2014 and is expected to account for three times that in 2020" (The Guardian, 2016). The dovetailing of the scholarly exploration of mobile telephony with the popular and commercial excitement that the technology has generated stems from its unique characteristics relative to other forms of information technology (see Tettey, 2013a). As Hermanns (2008, p. 76) points out:

Compared with computer-based information technology such as the Internet, mobile phones are more prolific and used by a wider range of people, spanning age, class and educational differences. The technology has low entry barriers as it is cheap and relatively easy to master for most users (see also Kavita et al., 2009:330).

Concurrent with the changes in the mobile technology landscape has been the continuing spread of democratic fervor among citizens intent on exercising their rights to free expression, democratic participation, and accountable government. Some analysts contend that the confluence of these parallel 'revolutions' provide a strong catalyst for promoting, strengthening, and consolidating democracy, citizen engagement, and responsive government (Dahlgren, 2013). As Wasserman (2011, p. 146) contends, in relation to Africa, "the widespread uptake of mobile phones has led to renewed optimism about the potential they hold for stimulating political participation and widening democratic debate." However, as Coleman and Spiller (2003, p. 3) opine in their assessment of claims regarding the positive impact of media technology innovations on democracy,

[a]ccounts of the democratic 'effects' of [such innovations] have been problematic ... [T]hey have tended to be overdeterministic about the social consequences of technological adoption ... [T]hey have often displayed theoretical naivety about the scope for transcending representative structures and institutions ... [T]hey have been methodologically preoccupied with narrow empirical questions, such as the number of representatives with websites or email accounts (see also Postill, 2012).

The critiques are even more applicable to mobile telephony, where much of the existing literature has not adequately responded to the issues raised above. Like Barber (2004), Goggin and Clark (2009, p. 585) note that there is a gap between the expansion in mobile telephone diffusion and use and its theorization as a phenomenon in the larger repertoire of community and citizen's media and its place as a communicative tool for deliberative, participatory and responsive democracy. Suarez (2006:118) laments that the potential political significance of the mobile phone is largely under-explored, whereas Hermanns (2008, p. 75) argues:

while the cultural and sociological aspects of mobile phone usage has been studied in more detail, ... there are far fewer publications in the political science literature on the impact of mobile phone technology on politics and political behavior (see also Martin, 2014:174; Miard, 2012:120; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014).

These critiques resonate in Africa and many developing countries where there is a dearth of scholarly literature on the intersection of information technologies and politics that is nuanced and contextualized enough to reflect the complex dynamics of their political landscapes. Like other African countries, Ghana has witnessed exponential growth in mobile phone access and subscriptions, in tandem with the consolidation of democracy. There has, however, not been a rigorous analysis of the intersections of these two phenomena that goes beyond the anecdotal. This paper seeks to address that gap by exploring the extent to which mobile telephony, in isolation and in concert with other media platforms, has borne out the optimism of the mobile phone-democracy nexus in the context of the country's politics. It examines the relationship between growth in mobile phone access and usage and citizen engagement with politics, with particular reference to participation in public discourse; interest aggregation and mobilization; political conversation; democratic education; and civic vigilance. Related to the foregoing is a focus on "subaltern counterpublics" as repositories of resistance and contested discourse in the spaces provided by the media, as they seek to delegitimize hegemonic positions on a variety of issues.

The paper also interrogates the appropriation of the technology by politicians, political parties, and public officials for political communication and regulation in day-to-day governance and politicking, and during electoral campaigns. This is followed by analyses of how mobile phones have facilitated the construction of bridgespaces and networks for the exercise of transnational citizenship in the deterritorialized spaces that Ghanaians in the Diaspora occupy, as they engage with the politics of 'home'. In sum, it evaluates Fortunati et al.'s (2008:136) observation that "mobile is not only a tool of personal and work-related communication but also a political instrument." To be clear, the paper is not claiming to prove the impact of these technologies in a direct and causal manner. Rather, it is addressing the implications of a changing media ecology on citizen engagement, with a focus on the political dynamics that result from that interaction.

## 2. Mobile telephony, articulation of voice, and political mobilization

The extent to which mobile phone technology has swept across the Ghanaian landscape, both literally and figuratively, is evidenced by the available data. By January 2015, mobile phone voice subscriptions were 30,629,604, constituting 99.13% of total telephone subscriptions and representing a penetration rate of 114.15%. The corresponding mobile voice subscription figure for 2008 was 11,568,850, representing a penetration rate of 51.8%" (National Communications Authority, 2008, p. 39). Mobile data subscription in January 2015 stood at 15,805,646, representing a penetration rate of 59% (National Communications Authority, 2015). The foregoing trend supports Sey's (2011:384) assertion that mobile phones are "no longer the purview of the wealthy, high- and low-end mobile phones are being accessed and used by people from all walks of life, and they are increasingly considered indispensable."

In concert with other media forms, mobile phones have created an impressive opportunity for Ghanaians to insert themselves in

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