Africa goes mobile: The coming of the InPhonation era

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In the last decade of the 20th century communication technologies made tremendous progress especially with the birth of the World Wide Web (www) that transformed the whole planet into a small village. Other communication sectors, namely telecom, followed with the birth and proliferation of mobile phones. With most countries having rudimentary landlines for major cities and only for the rich, Africa managed to catch the train where it was. The result is that in the first decade of the 21st century, millions of Africans own modern mobile phones without having known or used a landline. In that very period, it appeared that the mobile phone could go beyond its traditional function of 'phoning'. This essay aims to explore how the mobile phone has taken up one other function, namely the one of 'inphoning', understood as 'informing with a phone'. I will first place the inphonation notion in the historical communication context. Then I will look at it more specifically from the African context. Finally I will focus on a case study that I consider to be the pioneer of the InPhonation era in Africa.

The phone in the information age

The end of World War II heralded the beginning of a new age, the information age, as the way the production, conservation, transmission, and consumption of information drastically changed. The new era was a result of the huge amount of scientific information that Western, especially US, scholars had gathered and were willing to perpetuate and build upon. In those days, the phone was at its primitive stage and was not even taken into account by media philosophers who were prophesising the future of communications media. Although Africa took active part in the war, the information age remained an unknown concept until the mid-1990s. In the next paragraphs I would like to theorise the InPhonation era in the information age context.

To start with, the InPhonation era as I understand it is not outside the information age which, according to Douglas M. Eisenhart, refers to

> …nothing less than a new socio-economic, technological paradigm that says not only how the economy is structured but tells us how we work, how we play, and how we communicate. We are witnessing not only the convergence of existing communications technologies but the proliferation of new media for the processing, storage, transmission,

retrieval, and display of information in all forms-textual, visual, and aural- and in all markets- consumer, business and professional, and educational. [1]

Eisenhart's understanding of the information age presents three interesting and relevant points for the African context: first, 'how we communicate', second, 'the convergence of existing communications technologies', and finally, 'the proliferation of new media'. In most cases, the current digital era, which I should say is parallel to the InPhonation one, is the most visible and the most discussed. It takes internet as the centre of the entire information revolution. This way of viewing the information sector is defensible in the sense that the InPhonation era itself resulted and is essentially based on the internet. The only thing that changes is the medium used, that is, a mobile phone instead of a computer. Others would even say that the most recent third generation (3G) phones are more computers than phones. Better said, and as the next section will exemplify, they are devices with multiple functions, including computing, filming, sound recording, surfing the internet, messaging, and of course phoning, among many others.

Contrary to other more developed parts of the world, the information age in Africa started in the mid-90s, that is some 50 years after Vannevar Bush had suggested to introduce the Memex, a machine that would use microfiches to facilitate storage of, and access to information. [2] Two decades later, J.C.R. Licklider was to advocate a 'symbiotic relation between a man and a fast information-retrieval and data processing machine' that would improve the thinking process. [3] While Westerners were making considerable progress and opted to rely entirely on machines and technology, Africans were either still under colonization or emerging from it. Neither situation was suitable for any progress in communications technologies, simply because the priorities of colonial administrations and/or early post-independence leaders were far from being technological. Therefore, the information age in Africa coincided with to the coming of the radio, telegraph and print (newspapers, religious books or else). Person-to-person communication went on primitively, that is, using tam tam or sending messengers. Only a literate elite could write letters.

Some palpable change in the way Africans communicate started in the mid-90s, with the coming of internet. In early 2000s, the digital age had fully started and was transforming people's lives. To paraphrase media philosopher Marshall McLuhan's words in the 60s, Africa had finally become part of the 'global village' as 'time has ceased, space has vanished'. [4] That period also saw an unprecedented increase in mobile phone ownership in African cities. Many aspects of life changed as a result of the coming of the internet and the mobile phone: people started communicating via e-mail, phone text messages (SMS), and phone calls. A new money-transfer system came into being and relieved many people who could financially count on their relatives and friends living abroad. Simultaneously, that system allowed people to improve their life standards and afford mobile phones and surfing in cybercafés.

In short, Africa not only has fully entered the information age but also is stepping into the InPhonation era as telephone is becoming indispensable both in urban and rural

areas. The next section shed more lights on the role the mobile phone is playing in rural areas as far as access to information is concerned.

Phone becomes farmers' weapon

Cameroonian farmer with his mobile phone in his farm
©O. Nyirubugara, June 2008

Until recently, telephone in Africa was synonym of wealth and high status. The only place one could find a telephone set was in an office or in a well-to-do family's living room. The reality of this moment is that even farmers, fishermen, carpenters in remote villages are owners of mobile telephones and are organising their daily activities using them. I want here to illustrate this point with a personal experience that could be applied to other countries and sectors.

In early June I travelled to Cameroon for a training of mobile [phone] reporters in that country and took advantage of that time to make some mobile reports myself. One subject I was interested in was the uses of the mobile phone in a rural context. I already knew that a farmers' support body based in the capital Yaounde had been offering services to farmers on phone and for free. I wanted to know more about it and visited one farm in the Minkan village, some 25 km from the capital. What I discovered there was instructive as to the crucial role the mobile phone is playing in rural farmers' everyday life. Constant Balla, a 35-year old farmer owning large fields and seven fish pools, could not believe that I was going to make a video with the Nokia 73 I was holding. At first sight, he could not see the difference with his own phone. The image of TV or video journalists he had was a crew with a big camera and microphone. I explained to him that the device I was holding was not just a telephone, that phoning was just one function among many others including filming and photographing.

After that preliminary stage regarding my own phone, I started interviewing him about his own and how he used it for his farming and fishing activities. He was marvelled by my story but he found his own not as interesting as mine and wondered why it should be worth reporting on. He bought his first mobile phone in 2001. In 2004, when the Yaoundé-based Service d'Appui aux Initiatives locales de Développement started offering technical support to farmers via the phone, Balla joined the initiative and started receiving expert advise and counselling on farming techniques, sales, pricing, fertilizers, predator fish, etc, all that for free and from his farm. The only thing he needs to do is to 'beep', that is, to dial the support service's number and to stop the operation once the first ring goes. An engineer notes down all missed calls and calls the farmers back to inquire about their problems. Agronomist Théophile Nono of the support service told me that he received twenty such calls every day. His work was to check his

rich documentation, surf internet if necessary and propose a solution to the farmer. Unconsciously contradicting his first impression that his story was not worth reporting on, Balla concluded that 'the mobile phone has become a weapon for farmers', inferring that some years, back the phone was 'a weapon' for other categories (business men, civil servants, etc). [5]

At this stage the mobile phone reflects two major developments at two different levels. The first development is that the phone I was holding was not meant only to make calls. I had even never used it for that and had never put any SIM card in it. I was using it to make and edit videos, which was close to a miracle in the farmer's eyes. A second major development is that Balla's phone kept its traditional function of 'phoning' but went a big step further as it connected him to the engineer's source of information and to internet with little effort. In the case of my phone, the development took place at the highly sophisticated level and involves financial means and some technological and professional knowledge. In the case of Balla's phone, the development occurred at a lower level and requires only one thing: a mobile phone. No special knowledge is needed as the engineer brings the expert knowledge down to the peasant's level of understanding.

Similar developments could be observed in other countries and sectors. In Uganda for instance, the Women of Uganda Network is combining radio and mobile phones to propagate information to rural women farmers. Women SMS their questions or pose them by calling a specialised community radio and receive SMSes back with answers. The most recurrent ones are turned into a radio broadcast. [6] Similarly, Sierra Leone farmers have organised themselves in a countrywide network and the connection is maintained thanks to the mobile phone. They check what the prices are in other parts of the country before establishing prices in their own region. Mohammed Conteh of We Care Development Foundation told me that peasants used to be cheated by smarter traders who took advantage of lack of information circulation among peasants. [7]

My point is that something is happening in the way Africans use mobile phones. The common point between my phone, Balla's, and those used by Ugandan women and Sierra Leonean farmers is that 'information' is the key element: I needed to bring out the information that the phone was revolutionising farming; Balla and Ugandan women need information about their farming techniques; Sierra Leoneans need daily information about food prices so that they can harmonize them. Since those pieces of information transit via the phone, I find the neologism 'InPhonation', the most appropriate term to describe the current phone-related developments as its phonology lets both the terms 'phone' and 'information' appear. The coming section goes further with this argument, focusing on the VoicesofAfrica mobile reporting project.

Focus on the VoicesofAfrica

Olivier Nyirubugara training Cameroonian journalists on mobile reporting in June 2008 ©O. Nyirubugara, June 2008

In the previous section, I did not mention why I was making the mobile videos in Cameroon and, above all, why I should make them with a mobile phone while I could afford to have a bigger more professional camera. I was in Cameroon to train journalists who were joining the VoicesofAfrica mobile reporting project. The report on the phone in the farm was a quick demonstration to them as to what the mobile phone is capable of. This section aims to briefly introduce the VoicesofAfrica mobile reporting project, to explore the central role played by the phone, and to discuss the lessons and challenges the project is facing.

Voicing African views

The VoicesoAfrica mobile reporting project is an initiative by the Netherlands-based Voices of Africa Foundation, previously known as Africa Interactive Media Foundation. [8] The project was launched in May 2007 with the aim to empower African young journalists so that they can find their way into international media. Empowering journalists meant providing them with a high-tech mobile phone together with a blue tooth wallet-sized keyboard, training them on the basics of the phone and mobile reporting, and supporting them finically during the project period. The project started in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and Mozambique, and was extended to Cameroon in June 2008. I was lucky to coordinate the project since the start and to see it growing.

Quite in the beginning, the idea was not to compete with the BBC, CNN and other world media organisations which have huger financial and human resources. Our strategy was to voice those views that the big media organs ignore and find not worthy. One example I like to give to mobile reporters is the one of a press conference by the head of the state about, let's say, banning maze export to curb food shortages. Most reporters would hasten to go to the presidential palace to get the news from the horse's mouth, which is a sacred principle for journalists. The result will be a bad video showing a hardly visible and audible person far away. Better images will be published by the BBC and CNN and ours will just be ignored. Our strength is in going to the general public, in villages and 'voice' the views from farmers, fishers, traders, and other rural populations not only about the president's decision but also about its impact.

The reporting phone

The question why the project prefer mobile phones comes almost always when people hear about the VoicesofAfrica. They wonder why the project has not opted for [semi] professional cameras that can produce better quality images. The truth is that at the end, they understand why and my aim here is to produce the same arguments I give to those asking that question.

Nokia 73 phone with its bluetooth keyboard. © Uluru

So far, the mobile reporters have been using Nokia 73 phones which is suitable for [internet] video/photo making, sound recording and internet surfing. The initial idea was that all contents – videos, pictures, and texts – be uploaded directly from the phone. The first step was thus to connect the phone to internet using the General Packet Radio System (GPRS), the protocol that governs phone-internet connections. The content should be uploaded from the phone as soon as possible and before the news is too old. The files are expected to land on the project's servers directly from the phone, which is not the case for video camera.

Another point is that the advanced phones the project uses allow basic editing, including cutting, merging, and some sound manipulation functionalities. All these functions are easy for self-teaching. In addition, text is a very important component of a mobile report and should be produced and filed without relying on a computer. As far as I know, the standard and even semi-professional cameras do not have all these functions. An [advanced] computer and a professionally trained staff are needed for editing, text writing, and a special [satellite] connection is necessary for uploading.

Moreover, in the African context, a camera would be intimidating for locals while the project wants to bring our local views in the most spontaneous way possible. A telephone fits in a trouser pocket and seems ordinary to any person who sees it. That is not the case for the camera. That pocket-portability also makes the safety issue less acute as no police officer will suspect that a phone could serve as a camera. Even if he does, there are millions of phones every where and he would have trouble detecting which one is meant to make mobile reports. This aspect is very important because once each mobile phone has become a reporting tool, many things will change and some forms of open public injustices, corruption, and mismanagement will cease as each pocket will be supposed to harbour a [connected] camera. The expected result of mobile reporting will boost good governance, human rights and justice by establishing a sort of mobile reporting ubiquity on the continent. That ubiquity is far from being reached as obstacles are still numerous.

Lessons and challenges

When I finished editing my mobile report on the phone in the farm in Cameroon, I wanted to upload it from my phone. I could easily connect to the project's video-upload page, browse to and attach the edited video. I clicked on 'Send' and was expecting to see a left-to-right movement of the progress bar. Instead, it remained inactive and blank for a few minutes before the whole operation was interrupted by a 'the service you are seeking is not available' error message. A technician of Orange, the single telecom operator with GPRS, told me that that technology was only two month old in the country and still needed to grow and improve.

The above experience summarises the first major obstacle the project is encountering on its way. Reporters in Cameroon will depend on the internet café until the GPRS technology has matured. Unlike Cameroon, Ethiopia had neither [nascent] GPRS nor good-connection internet cafés. In April and May 2008, we launched the testing phase in Addis Ababa but quickly realised that the project was deemed to fail. The testing reporter could not upload a one-minute report with the size of about 6MB. He needed to chunk them into smaller 10-second bits to be pieced together into one coherent report once they reach the server.

The current stage is far from ubiquity as only five out of fifty three countries have so far joined the project. The experience was more or less successful in Kenya, Ghana, South Africa, where GPRS technology has made considerable progress. Cameroon will shortly have GPRS. In Mozambique, the project never fully kicked off due to lack of technological infrastructure. It is my hope that the current efforts to surround Africa with the undersea fibre optic cable will finally bring a solution to the GPRS and broadband connection issue.

Other challenges are more psychological: colleague journalists do not take mobile reporters seriously since they have a 'phone' rather than a traditional reporting tool. The argument I always wanted reporters to use was that the device had the form of a phone but was not. Actually, how can it be called a phone when 'phoning' is just one secondary function compared to primary functionalities like video-making and internet surfing?

Conclusion: The way forward

The InPhonation era in Africa has come and is promising to make unprecedented achievements with the long-awaited fibre optic cable. All services are exploring possibilities of integrating the phone in their strategies. Money transfer agencies were among the first to benefit from the growth of mobile phone ownership. Politicians followed and devised ways of reaching voters via SMSes. The newly born mobile reporting is just adding another brick to the InPhonation revolution. At village and farm levels, the phone is changing lives by bringing information almost instantly to phone users with little hassle as the phone-in-farm story demonstrated. Far from being another useless, pretentious and empty neologism, 'InPhonation' reflects the new role the

mobile phone is meant to play: the transmission and reception of information in the forms of sound, moving or still image, and text, or all at once.

Notes

1. Douglas M. Eisenhart, *Publishing in the Information Age. A New Management Framework for the Digital Era* (Westport, 1994)
2. Vannevar Bush, *As We May Think* in The Atlantic Monthly, July 1945, http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/194507/bush
3. J.C.R. Licklider, *Man-Computer Symbiosis in IRE Transactions on Human Factors in Electronics*, volume HFE-1, pages 4-11, March 1960 http://groups.csail.mit.edu/medg/people/psz/Licklider.html
4. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Message* (Corte Madera, 2001)
5. The mobile report I made can be viewed here: http://www.africanews.com/site/list_messages/18810
6. More information on http://www.wougnet.org
7. AfricaNews.com, 14 January 2008, S-Leone: Phone increases farmers' income, http://www.africanews.com/site/list_messages/14661
8. More information on the VoicesofAfrica project website http://www.voices-of-africa.com