

The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller. Oxford: Berg, 2006. ix + 212 pp., notes, appendix, references, index.

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While the Internet dominated many early discussions of the social and cultural impact of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the cell phone has had a much more profound effect among low-income people in developing countries. In *The Cell Phone*, Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller take on the important task of assessing the consequences of cell phone use for low-income communities through an ethnographic study of the cell phone in Jamaica. Combining the tradition of policy-oriented development studies with richly textured ethnographic analysis, Horst and Miller make a powerful case for the need to address the wider communication ecologies within which cell phones are embedded. As an “Anthropology of Communication,” *The Cell Phone* thus examines how mobile telephony in Jamaica articulates with locally situated cultural meanings and social practices.

In their introduction, Horst and Miller introduce the book’s theoretical foundation, which involves the concept of “expansive realization,” the idea that “technology is used initially with reference to desires that are historically well established, but remain unfulfilled because of the limitations of previous technologies” (p. 6). In this sense, the cell phone does not so much generate entirely new practices as expand upon already existing modes of communication and interaction. The first four chapters provide the necessary theoretical background as well as the



social, economic, and technological context that sets the stage for the ethnographic core of the book.

Chapter 5 analyzes the phenomenon of “link-up,” whereby cell phones are used not only to intensify social relationships and allow for greater coordination but also to communicate and network as goals in themselves. Link-up, a traditional mode of social interaction expanded and facilitated by the cell phone, refers to intensive social networking among kin and friends involving regular, very short cell phone calls meant to forge and maintain social connections. Although networking is the primary goal, the resulting relationships can be used for economic aid, sexual liaisons, business contacts, and psychological support.

The next two chapters go on to explore some of the economic and social implications of this practice. Chapter 6 provides an answer to a puzzle introduced by Horst and Miller in their discussion of the cost of cell phones in chapter 2: why low-income Jamaicans claim to use the cell phone to save money even though most households spend more because of their adoption of the technology. Far from an unnecessary additional cost, the cell phone is central to economic survival, providing an ideal tool for building and making use of extensive social networks that can provide economic support in times of need. This builds on another traditional practice among poor Jamaicans: giving as a way to create and activate relationships that may come in handy later on. As Horst and Miller suggest, “the cell phone is about as effective an instrument as can be imagined for assisting in low level redistribution of money from those who have little to those who have least” (p. 114). Chapter 7 considers how low-income Jamaicans use the cell phone to relieve a culturally elaborated pattern of stress and insecurity referred to as “pressure.” Once again, cell phone use has to be understood in terms of local meanings and forms of interaction.



The final two chapters then turn to a broader evaluation of the impact of cell phone use in Jamaica, combining traditional metrics from development studies with an ethnographic focus on local categories and idioms. With regard to the former, a key finding is that to adequately assess the impact of the cell phone in areas such as health and poverty reduction, a consideration of the wider communication ecology is essential. In this sense, the cell phone has contributed relatively little to the ability of low-income Jamaicans to access medical information and health care, but it has also played an indirect role in securing transportation, helping to pay for bills, and learning about alternative folk remedies. Similarly, the cell phone has done little to generate employment and entrepreneurialism, but it has allowed low-income Jamaicans to access vital economic resources through their social networks. However, two of the most common ways Jamaican adults use the cell phone are to organize church functions and to bet on the lottery, reflecting culturally embedded meanings regarding the role of devotion and fate in determining economic success. As Horst and Miller suggest, “Given the increasingly strong connection between the cell phone, the church, and the lottery ... it is not surprising that the cell phone itself is commonly looked upon as a form of blessing” (p. 154).

The Cell Phone is at its best when offering such culturally informed analyses that situate cell phone use among low-income Jamaicans use within broader social, cultural, and economic contexts. The call to take wider communication ecologies seriously when assessing the impact of cell phone use is a welcome antidote to more narrowly economic modes of evaluation. Moreover, the rich ethnographic detail and extended quotations in local dialect provide a fresh human touch. At the same time, one of the book’s main strengths is also a weakness. The effort to combine a policy-oriented focus from studies of international development with a culturally resonant, finely textured ethnographic sensibility often leads to a disjuncture between two very



different styles of writing and analysis, as becomes apparent in the last two chapters. In addition, the emphasis on evaluation also generates a more linear mode of organization than might otherwise be the case.

Overall, however, this is an extremely important, fascinating book that sheds critical light on some of the major issues of the day: the prospects for poverty reduction and social well being among low-income populations, the relationship between ICTs and development, and the wider links between technology, culture, and society. Although there have been previous studies of cell phone use in wealthy industrialized countries, this is the first ethnographic study of the cell phone in the developing world. It will be essential reading for scholars and students in the fields of anthropology, sociology, communications, development studies, as well as science and technology studies (STS).



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