Chapter 2

Approaches to Development in M4D Studies:
An Overview of Major Approaches

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the proliferation of mobile phones in developing regions has opened up a range of possibilities and new avenues for individuals, governments, development agencies and civil society organisations. But we also know that development is a disputed concept and conveys a range of different connotations. Therefore in this chapter we examine the areas, where mobile phones are discussed as vehicles for development (i.e. M4D), and how mobile communication is related to the idea(s) of development today. To examine this, we have reviewed M4D articles in three major conference series and open source journals during 2008-2012. Three dominant areas of M4D emerge out of our sample: livelihood, health and civic participation. We find that M4D is largely based on an economic understanding of development and biased towards techno-determinism. We conclude this chapter by suggesting a future path for studying the impact of mobile communication in developing regions, something what we label as a dialectical approach.

INTRODUCTION

A volume on ICTs and social change cannot bypass the important, but ambiguous, notion of development. In this chapter we focus on mobile phones since this is the ICT that is mostly used in so-called developing regions. At the end of 2014, the number of mobile cellular telephone subscriptions had reached 95 per 100 inhabitants of the world population (ITU, 2014). While the so-called developed world has levelled out at a subscription rate of 114 per 100 inhabitants, the developing world has increased from less than 5 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in 2000 to more than 80 in 2010 (ITU, 2014). This

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implies that more than 80 per cent of the total number of mobile phone subscriptions worldwide can be found in developing regions (compared to less than 30 per cent at the beginning of the millennium). In relation to landline telephony and Internet devices, the basic mobile phone is the ICT par excellence in developing regions. Hence, development initiatives based on mobile communication are important and timely as the growing research area Mobile Communication for Development (M4D) bears witness on.

This chapter is situated within mainstream Information and Communication Technologies for/and Development research (ICT4D or just ICTD). While we recognize that this is an interdisciplinary field with a myriad of technologies assimilated into the acronym ICTs, the mobile phone has clearly emerged as the front-runner in this conglomeration of technologies, with many perpetuating its explosion due to its affordances (explored subsequently). But where a number of ICTD models have failed (Dodson, Sterling & Bennett, 2013), the mobile is being heralded and touted as the solution to successful ICTD (see critical views from Gurumurthy, 2010; Heeks, 2010). We also identify that a growing recognition of the potential of mobile phones has inspired a number of research endeavours and publications that draw the mobile out of the wider ICTD field (Gomez, Baron & Fiore-Silfvast, 2012).

In this chapter we are particularly interested in how development is approached and understood in M4D studies. Drawing on a literature review of open source ICT4D journals and three conference series, this chapter provides an overview of the areas in which mobile phones are discussed as vehicles for development, as well as how development is understood in these areas. Our audit takes its point of departure from 2008 since this marks the year that the first conference solely devoted to M4D was held. Also, the last survey of the M4D field was published 2008. Hence an overview of contemporary topics and understandings is timely.

In 2008 Jonathan Donner published an overview of literature on research approaches to mobile usage in the developing world. His overview was arguably the first, covering about 200 studies up to October 2007. He distinguished between a) studies of determinants of mobile adoption, b) studies of impact of mobile uses, and c) studies of the interrelations between mobile technologies and their users. In his survey he identified a strong economic development perspective. Donner was also supposing (or finding, this remains somewhat unclear in his paper) a techno-determinist effect studies rationale behind research on mobile uses in developing regions, often grounded in an economic approach to development. Another of his findings is that studies of determinants of mobile adoption often are justified by reference to the diffusion of innovations’ approach (Donner, 2008, p. 144), theories that in turn assume a somewhat techno-determinist effect studies rationale (see Nederveen Pietersee, 2010), i.e. that mobile phone adoption is supposed to bring about certain effects, in particular the economic development. Donner’s overview – even though set very differently from ours – serves as a point of departure for our interest in an updated survey of the M4D field. In particular we wonder if techno-centricity and economic approaches are still dominant?

The broader field of ICTD has largely been driven and analysed in terms of economic development and market expansion (Mpogol, Usanga & Tedre, 2008; Nederveen Pietersee, 2010, pp. 6, 166). However, rapid growth in the number of mobile phone subscriptions does not imply economic development per se (Mpogole et al., 2008; Mtenzi, Chachage, & Ngumbuке, 2008; Unwin, 2013). In fact, economic approaches to development have been, and continue to be, widely contested (Nederveen Pietersee, 2010, p. 7; Carmody, 2012). Given this heterogeneity of development thinking and the controversies over the term development in itself (Traxler, 2008; Nederveen Pietersee, 2010, pp. 5-8, ch. 3; Unwin, 2013), we also seek to investigate how development is understood and approached in our updated M4D sample.
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