E-Seminar 64
Mobile Technology, Mediation and Social Change in Rural India

by
Sirpa Tenhunen
University of Helsinki

Discussant Comments by
Mirjam de Brujin
Leiden University

This paper is a summary of the recently published book of Prof. Tenhunen 'A village goes mobile' (2018). With its extensive literature review and the empirical examples it reveals that the study of mobile telephony has become an established field of study in Anthropology. The paper reads as an agenda for future research for such anthropology, with different chapters: 1. Gendered contexts; 2. Politics, political agency and media; 3. Smart phones, leisure and hierarchies; set in a frame of social change and development; and with as methodology ethnography in cultural and socio-political context.

The research for this paper is based in India, but it does resonate with my own observations and research in West and Central Africa (e.g. de Bruijn 2014, de Bruijn & Brinkman 2018). In this short review I will suggest a few different themes/topics based on my reading of the paper to guide a comparative ethnography of mobile telephony-studies.

A long connection between the author and a village in India (West Bengal) is the basis of the observations that are shared in the book and summarized in the article (1999 till 2013). It is nice to read this itinerary of a researcher in the field encountering a rapid change that cannot be overlooked. I had a similar experience during my regular fieldwork periods in West and Central Africa. I started fieldwork at an historical time when mobile telephony was starting to become more and more pervasive and I came to the conclusion that this was indeed a historical moment of change. I did the same as Prof. Tenhunen and started studying mobile telephony, society and socio-political change. Similarly to Prof. Tenhunen I do fully embrace the understanding that these kinds

of innovations and developments of media technologies in society need to be studied diachronically, in cultural and socio-political context and with an ethnographic eye.

Methodology

Unfortunately the paper has no section on methodology, which will probably be part of the book. We do learn that Prof. Tenhunen has lived in the village, stayed with the family and observed the participants over a period of 15 years. I will have to read her book (and I will do) to understand better how she did this research. My own experience in this field has raised many questions also with regard to the practice of ethnography. Indeed the book of Horst & Miller (2006) coins the term 'ethnography of communication'. The technology has changed enormously since then and we have entered the era of digital humanities, with all its new possibilities to do research (See for instance Pink 2012, Berry 2017). But next to the techniques of research also our own relationality in the field changes, just like the relationality of the people with whom we work. If we want to develop a field of comparative mobile telephony study the exploration of methodology/ies is important. In this line of thought I would like to ask Prof. Tenhunen how she envisages her own methodological choices with reference to the broader question of how do we study mobile technologies?

The fast changing technology and social change

The last section of the article delves a little into the use of smart phones and what it means for society and the individual. It is clear that the arrival of the smart phone is again another development of the technology. In the past 20 years the changes have been huge. Every return to the 'field' showed new developments. This rapid change of the technology turns our studies soon into historical narratives. The films I made in 2010 are not longer really representative for the practices of today. I am still searching for the concepts and theories to give enough consideration to this aspect of the speed of change.

Prof. Tenhunen remarks on change in the village: the main change is in the (re)organization of agriculture. However at the same time she observes that because of this change people start to search via mobiles new employment elsewhere. What then is the link between this agricultural change and the fast development of communication technology?

The speed and layeredness of socio-political change will or will not be the same in different regions, and comparison may help us to understand this better.

Information 'work'

One unifying topic in the three empirical examples of the paper is that people get access to more information, either by calling, or through the use of social media and accessing Internet (Facebook). And hence illiterate, non-educated, educated, etc. people get access to information and 'use' this information. As Prof. Tenhunen shows this leads to new relationalities and also different

interpretations of self/identity, position in society, etc. We should question what kind of information is sent around? And how can people shift fake from real, or do they need to do so? This Information 'work' is an important topic to discuss. (Cf. Fabian 2003, where he explains the concept memory 'work', Cf. de Bruijn 2018).

Hierarchies and inequalities
In the ICT4D and M4D theories there is a firm 'belief' in the democratizing possibilities of new Communication technologies. The paper is also a response to this 'theory' or if you wish 'belief'. As is clearly shown in the examples in this article Mobile Phones and their use cannot change existing power relationships and hierarchies, probably a little, but in many instances it is either a work in progress, or it exacerbates existing hierarchies. However, there are few glimpses of change that are also presented in this article, i.e. in gender relations, although mainly for the better off, the higher classes; and in the political agency of the population, are processes of social change that do blur power relations gradually.

In the development of a comparative approach to mobile technology we need to challenge over-optimistic interpretations of the democratic power of technological change, we also need to be careful to jump to conclusion about the inability of technologies to change existing hierarchies. A more diachronic comparison with other moments of ICT-'revolutions' can enable us to understand this better.

Creation of novel communication contexts
Prof. Tenhunen concludes after her review of various concepts in the study of media that the changes observed are also at work in the 'creation of novel communication contexts', in which the mobile phone plays an important role. Hence the cultural and social context, related to communication, is changing while the appropriation of mobile telephony in all its forms is transforming the individual, the relationality, etc. Hence we are back at the agency-structure debates, that we need to revisit to add more complexity and give room to cultural and social dynamics and contexts in order to understand the creation of communication contexts and the role of mobile telephony 'uses'.

Hence I would like to propose an agenda for comparative research based on the themes that I have read in this paper: 1. Methodology, 2. The speed of change, 3. Information 'work', 4. De-hierarchization, 5. Creation of novel communication contexts. Although Prof. Tenhunen's paper demonstrates the uniqueness of every setting and development, I would challenge her to start thinking how we could develop a comparative ethnography of mobile telephony.

I would like to end this discussion with a bit of a provocative thought and question. Most of the

themes discussed by Prof. Tenhunen are pretty classical in anthropology (gender, change, hierarchies etc.). From an anthropological point of view they are 'expected' whereas the study of this new technology also leads to new interpretations of the social and the political. There are really new dynamics and using the same anthropological concepts might suggest that we are looking at the repetition, in a different jacket, of the same patterns. Yet the world would be very dull if that is how (non) social change works. I am wondering thus if, in the development of a comparative study of mobile technologies, wouldn't it better to push beyond 'traditional' frames of anthropological thought, and seek new meanings and concepts.

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