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**Embeddedness and escape: Internet and
mobile use as poverty reduction
strategies in Ghana**

Don Slater and Janet Kwami

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Series Editors

Dr. Andrew Skuse, Anthropology, University of Adelaide, North Terrace, Adelaide, SA5005, Australia.
Tel: +0061 8 83034285
E-mail: andrew.skuse@adelaide.edu.au

Dr. Jo Tacchi, Queensland University of Technology, The Hub Z6 503, Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059, Australia.
Tel: +61 7 3864 8178
E-mail: j.tacchi@qut.edu.au

Authors

Don Slater is Reader in Sociology at the London School of Economics.
Address: London School of Economics, Houghton Street, London WC2S 2AE, UK. [Phone: +44 (020) 7849 4653; e-mail: d.slater@lse.ac.uk]

Janet Kwami holds an MPhil in Communication Studies from University of Ghana and is a researcher for Primary Research Associates, Ghana.
Address: P. O. Box CT 375 Cantonments, Accra, Ghana. [Phone: +233 24 4529036; e-mail: janetkwami@yahoo.com]

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Embeddedness and Escape: Internet and Mobile Phone Use as Poverty Reduction Strategies in Ghana¹

Abstract / The paper argues that Internet and mobile phone use represent two opposed configurations of ICT use, rather than a single movement into an 'information society'. Moreover each configuration exemplifies quite different poverty reduction strategies deployed by poor urban Ghanaians. Internet use is widespread and is predominantly used to chat with or email foreigners, generally in the North, as part of a strategy of accumulating foreign social, economic and cultural capital; it is part of a poverty reduction strategy of 'escape' that is generally conducted in a fantasy modality. Mobile phones, by contrast, are used to manage existing and embedded social networks, the complex family, business or social connections that constitute both resources and obligations. These two ICT configurations are not only opposed to each other, but they are also in some disjuncture with government and NGO policies on ICTs. Most significantly, such policies foreground use of Internet to meet information needs whereas most users understand the Internet as a chat medium.

Keywords / Ghana, Internet, mobile phones, migration, kinship, diaspora

Introduction

Both mobile phone and Internet use have developed explosively in Ghana, and over the same time period. It would seem commonsensical to treat these twin explosions as two aspects of the same technological experience, and this is precisely the rhetorical strategy of many in government, donor agencies and the commercial sector, for whom Internet and mobile expansion together herald Ghana's transformation into an information society.

In fact, however, Internet and mobile use in Ghana are following quite divergent paths. They are used separately and they are used differently, a fact which confounded our own initial research assumptions: they do not add up to a single ICT development trajectory, let alone one that points toward a consistent 'information society'. To the contrary, we will argue, mobile phones and Internet represent dialectically opposed strategies for performing related projects of accumulating, reproducing and managing social capital. These opposed ICT uses are, moreover, continuations of historical strategies of personal and collective poverty reduction, now pursued through new technological networks. Moreover, configured through these older strategies, the new media are practiced in Ghana according to logics that are significantly opposed, or unconnected, to the ICT-poverty reduction logics through which they are understood by those in governance and policy. Finally, there is a methodological subtext to this paper, as the story it tells could not have emerged except through an ethnographic engagement with the place of technologies in the specific communicative ecology and poverty structures of the people we were studying.

To put the argument at its most schematic: Internet and mobile use are experientially and practically separate and different, but both connect to the two predominant dimensions along which Ghanaians typically construct livelihood and poverty reduction strategies: firstly, the negotiation of extended kinship networks as both resource and obligation, and secondly, the idealization of 'abroad' (*Aburokyire/Abrokyere* – literally 'land beyond the horizon' or 'far away land', usually referring initially to US and UK) as source of development means and of escape. Mobile phone use in Ghana predominantly aligns with the first of these strategies, and is consequently conducted in a practical modality, mediating the mundane realities of existing kinship, friendship and business networks. By contrast, Internet use is conducted within a 'fantasy' mode, oriented to realizing advantageous relationships with unknown and largely random foreigners. It should be clear that both mobile and Internet use are diverse in Ghana as anywhere; however this analysis addresses the preponderant use of both technologies, particularly in our urban research site.

The material is drawn from a DFID-funded one-year ethnography of two communities, one urban and one rural, with additional material and interpretation from PhD fieldwork conducted by Jenna Burrell (LSE). This paper focuses almost entirely on the urban research, unless otherwise stated. The urban site, Mamobi, is a poor area in northern Accra, largely populated over the post-war period by immigrating northerner Ghanaians, as well as migrants from neighbouring West African countries. It consequently has a large (probably majority) Muslim population. This ethnic and migration profile, combined with high levels of poverty and a reputation for crime, gives Mamobi the local designation as a 'zongo', a Muslim slum. Male unemployment is high, with most employed men working as security guards or in the informal economy; women, as in most of Ghana, are almost universally

small traders. Infrastructure is extremely poor, with regular water shortages in some areas, horrific public toilets, regular flooding during rainy seasons, and low levels of health and education provision. Most people live in compound houses, comprising up to 35 individual two-room dwellings ('chamber and hall') in each, lacking kitchen, running water or toilets. One large sector of the fieldsite comprised habitations originally constructed as market storage structures, hence lacking windows. At the same time, partly because of its proximity to central areas of Accra, inhabitants have some access to wider urban experiences and facilities; moreover, media diffusion is extensive: although there are very few landline phones, both communication centres and mobile phone use are extensive, and there is widespread consumption of TV, radio, VCDs and videos, and of photography.

The Ghanaian Internet

Chatting: collecting foreigners

Over the course of our research, our urban site – Mamobi – has had about 10 functioning Internet cafes just along its main commercial road; a maximum of six at any one time, but now reduced to two. Even with only two survivors, this testifies to a significant Internet interest and use in such a poor area, and these cafes are busy, well known and used heavily (alternative access to Internet – either through private domestic use or other public access points – is virtually non-existent for Mamobi residents). The users are largely young – school kids and youths; predominantly male but with significant female patronage; mixing Muslim and Christian communities with no apparent discrimination.

Mobra (Mobra International Ventures) has been around for 18 months, has an excellent 'radio' connection (i.e. microwave mast) and twenty functioning computers, open 9 am to 4 am every day. On a typical afternoon, 18 or 19 of these computers are being used. On every single screen we see the same activity: *everyone* is chatting, either on IM (Yahoo or MSN), or in Yahoo chat rooms; perhaps one person is emailing a chat partner. The chat partners are all 'abroad', 'outside', mainly in Europe or America (but with a surprising number of chat partners from Asia – Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, India, China). The chats are largely short, cursory, disconnected, ephemeral. They are not cheap: 5,000 cedis (US\$) an hour is usually far more than a school kid's daily chop money (i.e. lunch money), and chat – as everyone says – eats up a lot of time. Moreover, café owners are not consistently sympathetic to users wanting to combine their resources: most insist on one user per computer, all paying, though they do not always enforce this. But kids will come here several times a week, for several hours, solely to chat with foreigners.

At Lambo's, down the road, the scene is basically the same, as at every café we have visited here or elsewhere in Accra. We meet Asma, who is 14 and a good, serious student. We get to know her after we've stood behind her, fascinated, for quite some time: Asma has up to 15 MSN chat windows open at any one time, and cycles through them, spinning her plates of chat with a random selection of foreigners accumulated through search and chat facilities. They are of different ages, genders, locations, and she insists on the conventional ASL query ('age/sex/location?') at the start. None of the conversations seems to get much beyond ASL, and different versions of 'how are you?', 'what are you up to?'. In fact, she seems more keen on spinning the plates (cycling through the windows) than developing the conversations. One window presents itself fairly convincingly as a Midwestern American woman in her late 30s, who seems quite keen to learn about Ghanaian life. Asma is quite curt with her and cycles on. Language might be one issue, but there is something else as well. And it is not shyness: Asma replies to queries with confidence and is very assertive online (though not in face to face conversation). She is also ruthless with any sexual innuendo (and her language certainly extends to skilfully identifying this).

But she is very keen to keep moving on. After much conversation we are still not clear what she is after. In reply to questions, she expresses her feelings in a conventional manner that we have come to expect almost universally: it is 'interesting' to talk to foreigners, you 'learn a lot'. To a great extent, her answers have to be taken at face value: she believes there is something intrinsically *enriching* about being in direct contact with foreigners, and the Internet (i.e. chat) is the most direct access imaginable to innumerable legions of the foreign.

We could say that Asma's relationships with foreigners are now mediated through the Internet – before this she would probably have had penpals, or have written letters to any northern address she randomly encountered. (An ICT policy maker recalled to us that as children they would find the addresses printed in Gideon bibles and write letters to them.) But it is equally accurate to say the opposite: Asma's Internet is mediated through conceptions of foreigners and 'abroad' that are fundamental to contemporary Ghanaian life. The idea that foreign connections are 'enriching' makes full use of the double meaning of the word: Asma feels socially and experientially broadened by these encounters (she is happy that while we were watching her she carried out a chat in Spanish with a partner who taught her a few words). Those around her are seeking other kinds of enrichment alongside this broadening: invitations abroad, or enticing a visitor to Ghana, help with visas, financial support for school or church, business, outright scams, marriage, whatever.

What most stuns us however is that although Asma is a serious student and has been coming to Internet cafes for about a year, several times a week, she has only once visited a website: after the tsunami, someone pointed her to CNN for news, but she has never returned to CNN, has never done a search, rarely sends email, and has no awareness of the existence of 'the Internet' in the sense of a world wide web, information source, multimedia environment or even entertainment. It simply does not exist for her. For Asma, 'The Internet' is a chat facility for collecting brief encounters with foreigners. These encounters are indeed brief, and generally do not extend to a second meeting, although she will still add them to her contact list.ⁱⁱ She – like many others – has many many contacts listed, organized by country; few if any of them ever appear as 'online'.

The accumulation of foreign chat partners can involve and combine all these enrichments, and they are not regarded as incompatible. To make a friend and to use a friend to get resources is no more contradictory than to have an extended family and to rely on that family for occasional money gifts and other resources to get by. The main difference is that a foreigner, unlike family, asks for nothing in return but also needs to be made to acknowledge one's needs or desires. Some local academics have likened the Ghanaian Internet to a 'cargo cult', and the analogy is in some respects plausible: as in the Papua new Guinea case – in which locals employed 'magical' devices in the attempt to make American and European cargo ships appear (and hence to exercise control over North-South flows of goods) – the Internet appears as a magical means to conjure up and command the random and arbitrary magic of the North.

The randomness of connection can extend to ostensibly rationalised and instrumental business uses of the Internet. A young man, Eric, is trying to market abroad glass beads made by his mother. He sends up to 60 emails a week to foreigners, and at first sight his approach appears entirely random, sending what is effectively spam to any email address he can collect, with no analysis of its appropriateness or effectiveness. He searches a biography of John Jacob Astor for names (of long dead American millionaires of the early C20), which he then runs against email address extractor facilities. This is not far removed from sending letters to an address copied from a Gideon's bible. For him, too, the Internet is effectively chat: he reads nothing on the web, and makes little use of the web as a search facility to rationally target business communications. Nonetheless he claims one success (an American woman bought \$3,000 worth of beads from him. This could not be verified (the emails were deleted), but his belief that his obsessive investment in random contact with the North would pay off rendered the whole approach rational to him.

It is important to look more closely at the 'randomness' of these encounters, see how it reflects back on 'random' social chat. Eric has a search strategy, if one that looks irrational from the point of view of Northern business and ICT practices. Firstly, in his concept a search engine works by giving an answer to discursive questions rather than by narrowing down arbitrary information indexed by keywords. Similarly, chat users in search of partners often have strategies for finding relevant people that are not in synch with the structures of chat rooms, profiles and dating sites. Secondly, Eric is extending to the Internet the same strategies he previously employed when selling the same beads on a tourist beach: approach everyone and give it a try, a strategy again common to chat partners. Thirdly, some search strategies only emerge on closer examination: a (male) chatter surveyed dating sites for middle aged Midwestern US businessmen to establish romantic connections; another careful targeted 'older and fat white women' as the most plausible prospects. Fourthly, Eric and others may attribute their lack of success not to faulty understanding of the communication media but rather to lack of trust in the absence of face to face interaction: Eric felt that if he could get to the States and meet these people, they would trust him and deal with him. Finally, both Eric and our chatters tend to imagine foreigners as people who will act in the same Ghanaian style that they do, as people who are looking for any opportunity to buy and sell something, anything, or to make any kind of 'enriching' contact.ⁱⁱⁱ

After chat and email, the second and *only* other significantly widespread use of the Internet is to pursue educational opportunities abroad. This is also the only significant use of web as opposed to chat that we have encountered. It has both the random character of the glass bead man, and the same deep roots in long-term personal poverty reduction strategies focused on securing northern social, cultural and economic capital. It involves finding as many sites as possible for northern colleges, courses and scholarships and emailing or filling in online forms. Before the Internet, more elite secondary school students had a name for this – ‘comsaw’ – which they pursued by writing innumerable letters to the very same institutions. A similar and related web activity is visiting sites connected to obtaining visas for foreign travel.

One contrasting example: Selima does not chat, and does not seek out foreigners. Her main use of the Internet cafes, which she visits every weekend by saving a portion of her daily chop money, is to email friends in Ghana, particularly school friends and friends from an earlier stay in Kumasi. This internal communication is perhaps becoming more common and may form a part of the Internet use of those who are mainly chatting with foreigners. However, Selima has never once visited a website, and never used the Internet for any kind of information search or for school work. And she is a very good and ambitious student, who has secured a scholarship to a top secondary, and whose siblings have gone to university, as she undoubtedly will, despite a widowed mother and considerable domestic poverty. Moreover, in her good secondary, she mixes with quite well to do girls, some of whom have both computers and Internet in their home (an *extreme* rarity in Ghana), and her close friendship network with these girls is also a ‘schoolwork group’. *None* of them has ever visited a website or used the Internet in relation to school. Selima’s Internet use is therefore closer to the mobile phone use we will describe below, and that is precisely the point: her Internet, framed in a practical modality oriented to mediating existing relationships, is still not ‘our’ Internet or the Internet inscribed in ICT development policies.

The situation in our rural site is a less intense version of the same dynamics, but with a change in the geographical scale of the fantasy connections. Twifo Praso, the district capital, has an Internet café set up by the District Assembly, with excellent connectivity (when there is electricity) and 20 computers in an air conditioned room. Although it is a development project, it is conceptualized on the model of a cyber café, with hourly rates, and that is how it is mainly used, except for some work with outlying schools. Cybercafé style use of the Praso centre was little different from what we found in Accra, and such users were the equivalent of Mamobi youth: only young people living in the main town, largely because they were secondary school boarders, could have this kind of regular Internet access, and they used it for the same kind of chat. Those village people who have any connection to the computer centre are generally conceptualising ‘abroad’ internally to Ghana: it is their connection to the other Ghana, the Ghana of cities with jobs, education and trade, that counts. First there is Accra and Takoradi, before there is London or New York. The computer is both the sign and the vehicle of a widening rural/urban gap, a little understood technology that threatens to cement urban youth’s hold over good secondary school and university places, over English, over foreign connections. The presence of computers in Praso, the chance for a child to sit for an hour with Mavis Beacon typing tutor, is a symbolic rather than practical enactment of a demand to narrow this gap, the losing battle with the city. Significantly, the Twifo Praso District Assembly put forward as an important motive for initially installing the computer centre their desire to keep, or attract, bright young people to the district: if they felt connected to the wider world while here, could maintain contacts and use global information resources, they might not so resent their postings to remote agricultural services or village schools. For everyone – here as in Mamobi – the Internet is firstly about ‘abroad’ and elsewhere.

These themes map out the regular and predominant patterns of Internet use in Ghana, and all of this is replicated in other parts of Accra in Jenna Burrell’s work.^{iv} This needs to be stated carefully. Random chat with foreigners is the predominant activity by which we would characterise the Ghanaian Internet. For many people, chat constitutes their exclusive understanding and use of the Internet. For some, random chat develops into more enduring (and more email-based) relationships. And we certainly find people like Selima who email with Ghanaian friends rather than chatting with foreigners (though she finally confesses that she did not chat, firstly, because she saw it would be too expensive, and secondly because no one had yet taught her how).

We can certainly point to other uses of the Internet but we would have to actively seek out special categories of users. We find a couple of school pupils whose parents are working in Nigeria; they regularly communicate through email and assemble in cafes for family chats. There is the older man from a Muslim NGO down the road who conducts much of his work through email. There is the man

going home to Tema who researches his mobile phone on the Nokia website, and is angry that there are many businesses charging to decode phones when the codes are available for free on the Internet. There is the cab driver whose brother in Germany either phones or emails to arrange shipments of used cars, as well as to keep in touch with other family matters. We find a local mobile phone card wholesaler who emails corporate clients to inform them of new promotions, getting orders by mobile phone in reply. And above all there are the many small businesses who use Busy Internet as a kind of hot-desking public office space (see below). All of these, however, stand out as exceptionally rather than normative.

Abroad

The full meaning of 'abroad' in Ghanaian life is beyond the scope of this paper. The sole point we want to establish is that 'abroad' represents a central dimension for thinking about livelihood and poverty reduction strategies, and that the Internet is framed by everyday users as a reasonable extension of this mode of thinking. While internal migration has played an important role in Ghana (which we continued to register in both urban and rural sites), the importance of 'abroad' reflects Ghanaian historical experience from the 1960s onwards. Before that point, Ghana had a net immigration surplus, with most outward migration performed by the elite, travelling to the north for education and professional employment, or to high status jobs elsewhere in Africa. By the 1980s, Ghana was losing large numbers of people, with continuous concern about brain drain, and losing them from all social classes. This was largely a result of near economic collapse, partly resulting from crisis in the cocoa market, and partly from related political instability. For Mamobi, the predominant attitude may be summed up as follows: Ghanaians generally depict themselves as hard working, honest and entrepreneurial, capable of high achievement if not hampered by lack of opportunity (education, capital, connections). Yet, it is often said, one could work hard all one's life within Ghana and end up with very little, whereas migration to the north will bring access to all the opportunities and rewards by which one can realize one's capacities. The discourse is as much of fairness, recompense and social justice as of simple gain. This personal attitude is often aligned with a national narrative in which Ghana has never realized its promise of being the first independent African state, endowed with significant natural and human resources, good governance and stable ethnic relationships, and a charismatic leader and leadership role within Africa. In both personal and national narratives, the advantages of the North include material wealth, educational opportunities, modernity in business and governance, just deserts and an absence of corruption and – very symbolically – technology and other intellectual capital that are put to effective use.

Moreover, both narratives are highly ambivalent. Personally, one would like to realize one's ambitions at home rather than abroad; collectively, there is an intense cynicism and distrust of Ghana's acknowledged dependency on donor aid, centred around both the ineffectiveness and corrupting influence of donor dependency.

The overwhelming – often exclusive – predominance of chatting over all other online activities, clearly performs a consistent and central theme in Ghanaian life but does so in fantastic rather than practical ways. It has all the appearance of practicality, and that is central to its pleasure: chat is direct conversation with foreigners, direct access that might lead anywhere, might realize all ambitions in a seemingly unmediated way – yet rarely does. One image captures this for us: a young male Mamobi Internet user is telling us about his plans to study in the UK; he found a course and applied for it online, and he proudly shows us the letter he received. The letter clearly states that he has been rejected because he does not meet the entry criteria. Yet he presents it to us, and the friends around him, as an acceptance letter, and as if it were itself a ticket to London. We do not know how to respond or whether to point to the discrepancy between what he is saying and what he is showing us. He is literate; and he does not appear to be lying, at least in any straightforward sense. Our interpretation is that the symbolic charge of this embodiment of foreign connection – a letter from a UK university – literally neutralizes its content. And that is the feeling that online chat promises to deliver continuously.

The point of this analysis is not to condemn the bulk of Ghanaian Internet use as unproductive or unrelated to development or poverty reduction. Above all, this description is not intended to support development discourse distinctions between worthy and unworthy uses of 'information resources'. We certainly find it difficult, at a personal level to avoid frustration – and boredom – with the restricted use of Internet possibilities, but that is hardly the point. The issue is simply that any intervention in Internet use has to work in relation to the overwhelmingly dominant local framing of the technology, deeply rooted in a much longer history of media use and development thinking.

Negative connections

We can partially account for the predominance of chat with foreigners in terms of the importance of abroad in livelihood strategies, but we also need to look at negative aspects of the ICT context. Essentially, Internet use is also confined to this modality because it exists in a social and institutional vacuum in Mamobi: in the absence of guidance and of available alternative framings or mediations of the technology, users – largely informed by peer group users sitting next to them at the café – ‘naturally’ frame and use it as they previously understood penpals, letters and other means of encountering foreigners. For example, we told Selima about websites and went with her to Lambos to search out schoolwork related resources. She was surprised and enthused to find that the web existed (after having used email intensively for a year). There had been no guidance from school, peers, NGOs or cyber café staff or owners: the simple fact is that no one had told her, or her peers about the very existence of what other users understand as ‘the web’; and what she knew of the Internet she had learned from peer culture (as was also the case for them). Selima’s (and other local) understandings of ‘the Internet’, therefore, exists within a structural bubble, unconnected to other potential framings, and ‘the Internet’ is therefore left to go in culturally normative directions. The question in Mamobi is not really ‘why do people mainly want to chat with foreigners?’ but rather ‘why are there no social networks that connect Selima to alternative and broader online activities and resources, that enrol other capacities of the Internet?’

In this respect, we need to look at another ‘fantasy’ that frames the Internet orients it to abroad and to ‘enriching’ encounters with random foreigners: the concept of lawlessness.

The headmistress of a successful private school tells us about several recent parent teacher meetings she has held solely to decide on what punishments they should inflict on students who are caught using the Internet in cafes. They have tried caning the kids in public assemblies but this has not deterred them. When she suspended some girls, the parents did not even think to ask them why they were not at school for a week, and without parental support there will be lawlessness. Indeed *that* is the issue: for the headmistress, Internet use is just one example of the lack of parental control that has led to all the lawlessness, crime and poverty of Mamobi. Internet use reflects this general problem, but it is itself particularly nasty. Young Internet users, she says as a matter of simple fact, are mainly watching pornography and engaging in credit card fraud. As a connection to ‘abroad’, the Internet brings loosened sexuality (hence further eroding family surveillance) and the criminal attitude of getting ‘something for nothing’ from the north.

The headmistress’s husband actually started the school in 1983 when his academically able daughters had tremendous difficulty gaining admission to a good secondary school just over the road in a wealthy neighbourhood. It was not because they were poor or Muslim, she felt, but because of Mamobi itself and its reputation: low, dirty, poor, disreputable and criminal. It is a ‘zongo’, which means a slum for in-migrating and largely Muslim northerners (northern Ghana, but also Burkina Faso, Mali, Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire, etc). The Internet represents the return of all they have been trying to suppress over the past 20 years; starting by citing the usual charges of porn and online fraud, the headmistress quickly turns to representations of what has really always concerned her: Internet use is a contemporary case of children being outside, on the street, beyond parental surveillance, control and understanding. It is part of a complex of generational deregulation that leads to crime, teenage pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, family breakdown, disrespect and therefore – and this is her point – unemployment and poverty. The Internet is the very opposite of a development tool, but she says this explicitly within a highly reflexive analysis of development strategies and barriers.

This is a standard, almost proverbial, response to the Internet amongst non-users in the area. Although we spend some time discussing with her the paradox of a headmistress punishing her students for using the facility that is globally regarded as central to future education and advancement, her chain of associations holds firm, and she likens her Internet prohibition to the way she ensures that the gates of her compound house are closed and policed by 10.00pm so her children cannot go out into the streets.

The issue of fraud is central, and any conversation about the Internet ends up with fraud. Fraud means credit card fraud – entering stolen numbers on websites to get goods from abroad. People offer detailed explanations of how it is done (there is even a Twi word for it, in Nima – sakawa), which recount the social organization and coordination of these operations across several continents, the existence of websites that generate false numbers, the areas of Accra most associated with fraud.

Everyone has stories of someone they know who has managed to get something by fraud. And they enjoy detailed discussions of why Internet fraud is a particularly heinous offence, what gives this technological crime its specific opprobrium (for example, it is an intrusion into the intimate sphere of the family: husbands will unfairly get into trouble if their wives find illicit payments on their credit cards).

We have investigated the reality status of Internet fraud from many angles, and cannot be sure how much is urban legend and how much is actual activity. There are clearly documented cases that have gone to court, but these are few, whereas fraud is claimed to be general and pervasive, and is used to characterise the entire Ghanaian Internet as such. We have many interviews in which people claim that they regularly and directly observe people at Internet cafés typing numbers into websites, but we have no idea how many – if any – of these attempted frauds have succeeded. We have not met anyone who has personally acknowledged receiving goods by fraud; the stories are always about a friend of a friend. Busy Internet had to block access to secure server connections, possibly in response to complaints from American companies that traced attempted fraud to Ghanaian ip addresses; but even here (where one would also expect far higher levels of techno-competence) there is no evidence as to whether the frauds were successful or just a nuisance, and there is some suspicion that Busy simply took these measures to preserve its reputation and that of the Internet (just as it very publicly bans pornography) in the face of the moral panic around fraud rather in response to actual criminality.

If we assume that successful online fraud is rare, but that both awareness of fraud and unsuccessful attempts at fraud are widespread, then our interpretation will point to something like urban legend and moral panic around new media. The Internet is a material cultural object through which Mamobi can speak about and negotiate its own reputation and its history as a zongo. Just as the headmistress anchors her social theoretical account of Mamobi's developmental backwardness in Internet fraud, some young people are thrilled by the proximity of this opportunity to take on a techno-outlaw status, even if only by distant association with the friend of a friend whose alleged fraud they've heard about. Moreover, even claims to fraud can be understood as a shadow form of the same shrewd and exuberant commercial opportunism that Mamobi youth are proud of – having the knowledge and wit to spot a good opening in new markets, new developments, new technologies.

For both the youth and the headmistress, Internet fraud crystallises the (positive and negative) magic of foreign connection, and it is probably as much of an idealized framing of the Internet as is random chat with foreigners. However, what it accomplishes in practical terms is to lock the Internet firmly into a social vacuum where alternative framings and uses cannot touch it, and to embed it further in the modality of fantasy connections with the North.

Ghanaian mobile phones

It is likely that the vast majority of phone calls in Ghana are uncompleted calls, known as 'flashing'. You call someone, let it ring once or twice, and disconnect before the call is completed; your name and/or number appears on the other's mobile, and this communication is interpreted contextually. People may have a routine of flashing the same four or five close friends and relatives every morning, to say hello, or of flashing a girlfriend or boyfriend regularly to assert presence and stay close. They may flash people to make or track meetings arrangements ('flash me when you get to Busy', 'flash me when you are on your way to the meeting'), or they may simply flash to say 'phone me back, I haven't any units left or I want this call to be on your bill.'

There is another kind of flashing occasion which is both practical and symbolic. Two people are introduced to each other for the first time through mutual friends or contacts. One flashes the other, and says, 'Now you have my number'. The receiver saves it in their contact list and then flashes back, and the saving is reciprocated. A relationship is acknowledged and pragmatically materialized in the technology; the social network is expanded and reciprocal access is allowed.

This mutual acknowledgement and inscription is apparently identical to Internet chatters who accumulate long MSN or Yahoo contact lists, and this is precisely how Internet users would like these lists to work: a wealth of live foreign contacts who are within 'flashing' distance. We might also interpret the many short, contentless online chats as a kind of online flashing, the point of both being to assert the mere fact of connection itself. But the Internet list is the exact opposite of the mobile

phone list: where the phone list inscribes an existing relationship into a pragmatic network (a real relationship is embodied in a listed name), the Internet list treats names as the means to magically constitute relationships (they are names without bodies). People proudly show long Internet chat lists largely comprising people long vanished or only briefly talked to very long ago. The phone list comprises useable contacts.

Flashing involves a clear and much discussed economic rationality, designed to win the fierce battle to keep a mobile in permanent operation. But this battle itself indicates the great importance attached to staying connected by mobile, and this importance – we would argue – is tied to the costs of maintaining, managing and expanding already existing social networks. Ghanaian mobile phone use consistently presumes stable, obligatory and demanding relationships and networks that precede phone use. Ghanaians not only use the mobile to reproduce those relationships as immediate, embodied and geographically proximate, as live and intimate. More importantly, the mobile is used to manage and reduce the heavy cost (in time, money and hassle) of the obligations imposed on them by the relationships themselves.

Michael, a man who flashes the same five people every morning, is not merely keeping in touch but also discharging obligations and responsibilities. Two of the flashes are to young female relatives boarding at a school in Accra, over whom he has a familial watching brief, to make sure they are behaving, to mentor them and to look after their welfare. The flashing, and occasional completed call, asserts and discharges these obligations which would otherwise involve considerable inconvenience and worry, and would distract from his more pressing work obligations as do so many of the calls of family. His other routine flashes are to friends he went to school with, now living in other cities, at distances that preclude regular meetings. The mobile both maintains those relationships, and his obligation to maintain them, with minimal effort.

Ghanaian kinship is often perceived and talked about as changing over recent years, and the mobile phone both marks and allows negotiation of important ambivalences about kinship obligations. Young and urban Ghana (and Ghana has an exceptionally young population, with extremely rapid recent urbanization) recognizes continued close ties and obligations to extended family and to village and region of origin (one's 'home' is one's family village, not one's current residence). At the same time, people recognize shifts towards an urban, modern and young lifestyle: urban marriage, for example, clearly still involves the extended family, but generally not polygamy (which further extends the family within older structures), and tends to treat the couple as an independent and nuclear node within a broader network, more than as a continuation of matriarchal or patriarchal lines. Extended family, stretching back to the village and forward to family abroad, continues to be a resource (for money, goods, employment, childcare, etc) and needs to be cultivated. It also continues to be a source of continual obligations and demands which have to be managed and even avoided or deflected, or delayed. Moreover, family obligation goes beyond blood relatives to people who are very close to other family members and are treated as family ('my sister' may mean my mother's daughter, my father's daughter by the same or different mother, my cousin (at any degree of remove), or a close friend of my blood sister or a girl who used to live with my aunt, etc, etc). These obligations may be unproblematically accepted in full or in part, but at the same time they are clearly acknowledged as an overhead on daily life, as a weight that drags on current personal projects, that holds one back.

Gabriel is a sociology graduate from a mixed northern and Fante family. His northern father is a junior son of a poor northern farming family, with traditional religion and extensive polygamy. The father was sent for southern schooling under an Nkrumah initiative and did very well, becoming a scientist, as well as looking after family cocoa farms for both his own and his wife's family. When his father recently became seriously ill, Gabriel had to step into his shoes to manage the cocoa interests. This was at the height of the crucial buying season, which he had to negotiate on the family's behalf with virtually no knowledge or experience of agricultural life, reporting back to family councils which were rife with erupting tensions between his mother's and father's extended families that had bubbled beneath the surface for decades. Gabriel's own life projects were placed on hold for the indefinite future, and without any clear or plausible exit strategy from these obligations.

Above all, the weight of obligation is imposed through direct personal access, and this is where the mobile both intensifies access but also allows the mediation and management of obligation. For example, one mobile phone company uses the phrase 'funeral traffic' (internally, not in public): mobile phone traffic entirely generated by the need to make funeral arrangements. Funerals are the central social event in Ghana, involving several months of planning, financial negotiation, mobilizing and managing extensive divisions of labour amongst dispersed segments of the family, coordinating

travel, and so on. 'Funeral traffic' not only labels the density of communications involved but also its direction: funerals are generally in the home village, whereas the bulk of decision making, resource and labour is in the city based family; funeral traffic is largely between the cities and between the city and the village. The mobile obviously minimizes the need to travel and speeds up planning and coordination, but it also allows the city-based family to remain at one remove, able to keep up their own lives while discharging their obligations.

Similar themes are reflected with regard to relatives abroad. Most Ghanaians express a strong desire to go abroad, but their feelings towards those who have made it to Europe or America are profoundly ambivalent: there is pride, envy, resentment and greed, generally in direct proportion to how much money or goods the émigré is sending home, and how widely she or he is distributing back home the resources and riches they are assumed to be enjoying in London or LA. In a discussion of new health insurance plans, a group of local health workers argued strongly that financial contributions to the scheme should not take into account whether you have relatives abroad: some relatives support the family, others send back nothing (either because they are not recognizing their obligations, or because they have their own families to support up there).

The mobile has a complex role in these connections. Firstly, the phone itself is the preferred gift to send back to Ghana, is itself the resource to be distributed and itself represents a discharge of obligations. It is preferred by those abroad because it is relatively cheap and is easy to send: as one person put it bluntly, it is better to send mobile phones home than the fridges they used to ask for. Recipients value the phone as a practical resource, as a mark of connection to abroad and to the relative abroad, and as a straightforward status symbol – modern, northern technology. Secondly, the gifted mobile phone is a way of managing North-South family connections: both sides see the convenience in at least one person at the Ghanaian family end having a mobile phone and acting as communications centre for the whole local family, distributing communications, duties and opinions on family issues. Finally, the gifted mobile becomes the object and mediator of further negotiations over resources and obligations: money to buy units is the real cost of mobile use, and frequently involves money remittances from the same, or different, relatives abroad to keep the phone in operation; these remittances are themselves both practical and symbolic of their continued acknowledgement of extended family obligations. Again, the mobile both discharges obligations and reproduces (practically and symbolically) the sense of constant and inescapable family demands.

The discussion up to now has focused exclusively on the extended family context. As noted, 'family' extends to other, non-biological connections; moreover, friendship networks (egg, informal and formal youth groups, school friendship groups) have a clearly familial structure of reciprocal obligations. Mobile use in these networks largely reflects the themes already discussed. An important issue here is the way phone use may reflect distinctions between reputable and disreputable obligations. The most important example of this concerns gender. Boyfriends and 'sugardaddies', as well as fiancés, will give their girlfriends mobiles so that they can be in contact directly, regularly and at will, and clearly with intentions of both control and surveillance. The woman's possession of a phone directly reflects her sexual status, and issues of sexual danger. There is the constant charge that mobiles increase the conduct of illicit relationships, and escape family surveillance. More practically, a young woman without a job who owns a mobile may attract nasty comments and a bad reputation: how can she pay for units? She must be using some man somewhere (or several). The use of a phone directly reflects relations of use and obligation between men and women.

Beyond this, however, there is an important but ambiguous distinction between 'social' and 'business' use of phones. The distinction is constantly asserted, for example in almost all of our specifically phone-focused interviews. People categorize their calls (mobile or land) into business or social. Non mobile users, particularly women, will say that a mobile is a good idea – or even essential - if you have a business, but is not financially justifiable if you don't. And multiple mobile ownership is entirely associated with local business people. Phone users frequently make such distinctions between social and business use, but it seems to break down almost in the same breath. The structure of Ghanaian life and enterprise makes it almost impossible to neatly divide contacts into business versus social. The distinction seems more of a legitimation strategy: a justification for having a phone (this is not frivolous or status driven; I need it for business) or an excuse for not having a phone (it's not that I cannot afford one, but I have no business and therefore no *need*). The rhetoric is, again, a language of practicality, concrete relationships and economic rationality.

The context for the Ghanaian mobile is the management of existing and obligatory networks, above all familial, and a balancing of acknowledgement and avoidance/evasion; as well as – perhaps – a 'modern' balancing act between 'my' life and my family. In contrast to the Ghanaian Internet, the

mobile is about the practical management of the real rather than the attempted realization of the ideal (foreign) relationship.

ICTs and poverty

During a long discussion with a very tight friendship network of young lads in Mamobi, about their hopes and ambitions, the conversation returned regularly to paranoia. 'If I ever got the chance to go abroad, I would not tell anyone until I got off the plane in London.' This is a common sentiment, and the reasons are conventional: other people are envious and try to hold you back; they will place curses and evil wishes on you and make something go wrong; they will say terrible things behind your back; or simply talking about your good fortune will somehow jinx it. And if it is not the evil envy of your neighbours, then it will be the demands of your family that will follow you and burden your fresh start. Stories of people hiding their new wealth are as common as stories of people flaunting it through new houses or largesse.

This conversation reflected the key poles of everyday poverty reduction and livelihood strategies in Ghana: the ideal escape abroad and the local web of obligations. The contrast between mobile phone and Internet clearly reflects this dichotomy between embeddedness and escape. It therefore also reflects the two traditional modes in which familial poverty reduction strategies are formulated: local resources (above all the family) as resource and obligation for mutual survival, and 'abroad' as the key to real success, development and the future. Home and 'abroad' may support each other, or undermine each other, or both; in any of these cases, the media associated with each strategy has to negotiate all this ambivalence.

If this analysis is correct – that the mobile manages embedded reciprocities and the Internet projects idealized gains from abroad – then we must also argue that mobile phone and Internet have been framed and constructed from the start as poverty reduction and development strategies. That is what they always already are; how they have been locally constructed: they make sense in terms of the two central modes of poverty reduction in Ghana over recent decades. If this analysis is correct, moreover, then the development agency question – 'how can we use ICTs for poverty reduction?' – is the wrong question, because it is always asked too late: it presumes the need to connect two disconnected things ('ICTs' and 'poverty reduction') whereas Ghanaian ICT use is already constituted largely as a poverty reduction strategy, or rather as two complexly and inversely related strategies, one to do with practical local networks and one to do with imaginations of foreign connection. The problem is that the policy makers do not understand, or agree with, or acknowledge these strategies.

The clearest example of disjuncture between public policy and actual ICT use concerns one feature that is common to both Internet and mobile phones in Ghana. It should be clear from our discussion that everyday users understand both media almost exclusively as means of communication and almost never as sources of information. This extends, as we have seen, to virtual ignorance of the very existence of websites, of the Internet as 'world wide web' or of the very idea of a search engine – and this even amongst enthusiastic young users, who are also educationally ambitious. By contrast, governments and NGOs connect ICTs to development and poverty reduction almost exclusively through concepts of information access and information resources. In the Ghanaian context, this aim may be correct and laudable but it does not connect to the 'Internet' and 'mobile phone' that has already been constructed by everyday users in Ghana. Who will look at their informative websites if websites do not constitute part of *their* Internet?

To be clear, the distinction between communication and information is not only imprecise but inappropriate to most of our ethnographic material. We are largely deploying this distinction ironically, and from the point of view of government and development agencies rather than that of everyday users: 'information', as it is used in public ICT discourses, signifies worthy use of ICTs as tools for accessing 'useful' data, with recognizable paradigm examples such as health information, school materials, government information and so on. We do not wish to deny the existence of specific and utilitarian information needs in this sense; but we equally would not want to denigrate the everyday information that is intrinsic to communicative use of ICTs. At the most obvious level, mobile phone

users in Mamobi will frequently say that one of the most important benefits of the mobile is saving wasted journeys: quite simply, mobile communication allows the transmission of essential information such as a person's whereabouts so that one does not spend a day travelling to see someone who isn't there. Similarly family information about states of health, finances and personal problems is essential information, and reducing the cost and inconvenience of communicating it is a major boon.

The central issue is not pitting informational versus communicative uses of ICTs but rather finding ways to match up everyday informational uses with policy concepts of information. There are many simple and practical steps that might address this disjuncture. Firstly, as already discussed, the extensive Internet use we see today in urban Ghana has emerged in a social and policy vacuum. As a result there are no social agents with an interest in framing new media and mediating it to users in terms of its wider and more creative possibilities, let alone their wider informational potential. Mamobi Internet users learn chat from their friends and set up an email account with the help of café staff. Neither government nor teachers nor café owners nor local organizations point the user towards alternative facilities. There are very practical and small scale moves that could be made, such as:

- public information posters listing useful websites and how to access them, to be displayed in cafes, schools, churches and clinics;
- the enrolment of information intermediaries such as local teachers, religious figures, health workers, café owners and operators, through local meetings and training. This will inevitably involve public-private partnerships and new organizational structures to involve ICT stakeholders.
- connecting informational resources to the actual communicative uses of Internet and mobile phone, by focusing on chat rooms, listserves and email rather than websites, or by distributing information through SMS;
- focusing on mediating information through a range of media, rather than attempting to shift Internet and mobile use: egg, enrolling information intermediaries (such as local youth groups) to source information online which can be disseminated through posters, leaflets, loudspeakers, local meetings and local radio.

Such suggestions point to the need to frame ICTs in different ways and to embed them more realistically in local social and communications networks, and to do this both through new content, new communication channels and new institutional contexts that expand the local sense of just what the Internet and mobile phone *are*. The corollary of this analysis is that if government and donors invest in ever more ICTs infrastructure and access but without addressing the framing and use of these media then they will simply produce more random chat with foreigners (in the case of Internet) and unrealized potentials in the case of mobile phones. Indeed this is what we observed in Twifo Praso, our rural site: the provision of well specified Internet and computer access largely replicated the structures and practices of a typical Mamobi commercial Internet café.

Finally, and to return to the central themes of this paper, there are good reasons to take very seriously the predominant current framings of mobile phone and Internet use – managing concrete relationships and pursuing idealised ones abroad – and for taking them as points of departure not only for expanding ICT use but also as clearly important in their own right. Firstly, extended use of ICTs to manage migration issues (internal and abroad) represent significant developmental gains and in numerous ways. In line with current concepts of migration and transnationality, ICTs can enhance real and symbolic mobility so that migration is not regarded, or practiced, as a once and for all departure or return but a state of continued connectedness and a continuous flow of people, communications, knowledge, networks and remittances in money and goods {see, egg,}. Both mobiles and – potentially – the Internet can maintain both connection and a sense of connection, and reduce the costs and problems of coordinating transnational and trans-Ghanaian relationships. The motivation of Twifo Praso district assembly to establish an Internet and computer centre in order to retain and attract teachers and civil servants to a currently remote posting is eminently plausible, but needed to be conceptualised more thoroughly in terms of migration issues than hardware access or computer training.

Secondly, there are straightforward economic and commercial aspects to using ICTs to develop North-South connections for poverty reduction. These included reducing the cost, time-scale and hassle of managing remittances, coordination and transportation, and increasing the ability to source goods and make payments. Some of this simply requires guidance in how to make effective use of ICTs (rather than reliance on word of mouth, which is often wrong or is blocked by the issue of scamming). Some requires public and public-private initiatives to devise online payment systems and other financial devices (egg, payment by prepaid cards, already well understood from mobile phone

use). In both cases, such moves would be highly popular, readily understood as practical and beneficial, and again lay foundations for more innovative use of ICTs.

Thirdly, while so much current Internet use reflects idealized constructions of global connections there is scope to structure these motivations and practices in more complex and expansive ways. One practical example is the online twinning of Ghanaian and British schools (through Sussex University and British Council schemes {ref websites? and Sussex papers}). Through online interaction and web based multimedia representations of life in both locations, students can develop more continuous and developmental relationships with people and places abroad, can expand their Internet use from chat to other technical possibilities; and can begin to integrate new information channels into their schoolwork and broader education.

Conclusion

Ghanaian Internet and mobile phone use are divergent but rationally connected extensions of existing and long-term livelihood strategies. These strategies have, unsurprisingly, framed everyday understandings and practices of new media: Ghanaian Internet use projects an ideal realization of that obligatory reciprocity – to be achieved with foreigners – that is imminent and ambivalent in those relationships with family and friends that are practically managed through the mobile phone. The generally unrealized ambition of moving an Internet chat with a foreigner from ephemeral and random conversation to a relationship involving money, visits, gifts, visas, connection, friendship, marriage, etc is more than attempted scam; it is a utopic familialization of relationships with strangers in order to secure the structure of obligation and reciprocity that is normative for local and embedded relationships.

If this analysis is correct, we need to understand how Ghanaian Internet and mobile phones point us towards two quite divergent – even diametrically opposed – extrapolations from underlying concepts of ‘a relationship’ or ‘connection’, and of how these are to be managed and mobilized as ambivalent structures of resource and obligation, advancement and demand. The very idea of convergence between the two media – on this basis – would require the closing of a gap that is not between two technologies, or two uses, or two institutional structures, but rather a gap between practice and fantasy, between embeddedness and escape, between long term, complex obligations and a fantasy world of ‘something for nothing’, of gain without enduring obligation, of a kind of freedom by which non-African modernity is often understood.

Finally the picture we have painted points towards highly consequential disjunctures between local understandings of new media, on the one hand, and policy and academic understandings on the other. This picture asks that we detach the potential relationships between ICTs and poverty reduction from global and abstract generalizations about information society and about information goods. Instead, it asks us to attend to the assemblage of communicative means and social networks that is in actual fact being constructed through everyday practice. In plain speak: if we want to get anywhere we had better start from where we are.

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Endnotes

ⁱ *Acknowledgement*: This paper is indebted to material provided by Jenna Burrell, as well to extensive discussions between the authors and her.

ⁱⁱ It is not uncommon for those with chat ‘penpals’, particularly more long term ones, to want to phone these partners or to receive calls. When accomplished, the calls are generally brief (because of cost), with a minimal content not dissimilar from online chat conversations (Jenna Burrell fieldnotes). This desire is entirely consistent with the argument presented here, as well as Slater’s (1998, 2000, 2002) concept of ‘progressive embodiment’: chat users have an understandable desire to

concretize and realize online relations by progressively embodying partners through additional media and sensory channels, with face to face interaction as the gold standard of authenticity in relationships.

ⁱⁱⁱ The argument, and example, in this and the preceding paragraph are heavily indebted to Jenna Burrell's fieldwork.

^{iv} One exception in Burrell's work were users of Internet cafes at the University of Ghana at Legon, whose use largely comprised information search, course related work and maintaining communications with family and friends.