

Culture of secrecy hinders Africa's information society

By [Mawaki Chango](#)

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Everyone needs and wants to communicate, and they do so with the tools at hand. Africa's needy urban people are using the most readily available communication technology for them, mobile phones, in innovative ways. But there is still a question over whether this access gives them true inclusion in the global 'information society' – the people with access to communication technologies and the information they share.

The striking thing about mobile phone technology is that where it is available, it is just about the most egalitarian communication technology available. It is well known that the mobile phone density far exceeded the fixed-line telephone density just one or two years after its introduction in most parts of Africa.

Certainly, as with other communication technologies, there are large imbalances in access to mobile phones, with the dividing line running between capital cities and rural areas, the busiest zones and those less busy. But provided that policy-makers and mobile phone operators ensure the provision of a fair coverage of the territory, many people find ways to access and use mobile phones and spread the costs, despite a scarcity of money and resources.

An overview of the profile of mobile ownership, access and use tells us a lot about the situation of most Africans in the information society.

Shared access

Across Africa from Dakar to Maputo, there is a particular trend in mobile phone ownership. A cell phone can circulate in a family from one person to another: if one person is expecting an important call, she or he might keep the phone with them the whole day, making it difficult to contact other members of the family, including the individual who actually bought the phone set.

In this context, the cell phone becomes a versatile tool, with the "owner's" identity changing from one day to the next, whereas elsewhere that tool is characterised as being highly individualistic. In such situations, the optimal use of the mobile phone is ironically still to use it as a fixed phone, keeping it at home and making it potentially useful for the whole family.

Another widely used money-saving device is the 'beep-call' – made by 'bipadores' (beepers) as they are known in Mozambique.

This allows people to contact mobile phone owners by sending 'beeps', that is, dialling the number and then ending the call before it incurs charges. A 'beep' call is usually a request for the mobile phone owner to return the call, but it can also be

used as a pre-arranged message (“I’ll beep you when I’m leaving work”).

In some ways, ‘beeps’ are used to redistribute the financial resources available through mobile phone networks, so that the maximum number of people can be part of the contemporary communication society: those with little or nothing claim contributions from those who have, or who have much more.

In fact, the divide is not just a simple question of financial resources – it can also be a gender divide. In personal or private interactions it isn’t proper for a man to send a ‘beep’ (requesting a call back) to a woman, even if he’s dead broke! I have seen an unemployed man receive ‘beeps’ from a lady with a rather good job who was aware of his situation. Traditionally, because the man controls the material resources, he is meant to pay for both man and woman.

The two-second chat

Users in Mozambique have gone a step further in developing a system of free calls – they have discovered that one phone company, MCell, starts charging calls from the third second after the connection is established. So users created the ‘bip falado’ – the ‘spoken beep’ – which consists of calling a mobile, speaking in less than two seconds and then hanging up.

Many conversations are conducted in this way, with two people calling alternately and giving the cue to one another in a series of short questions and answers, without disbursing a penny.

It seems that MCell is about to close this loophole. But in exchange it will include the same ‘Call Me’ feature in its prepaid package as its main rival, Vodacom. This feature allows mobile phone owners to send people a free ‘Call Me’ text message together with the owner’s phone number. But unlike MCell, Vodacom includes in its prepaid package a “number for life” – there is no validity limit, no need to buy air-time or recharge credit. It’s no longer just pay-as-you-go, but only-pay-as-you-need without any time constraint.

This means that with just the money needed to purchase a phone set (less than US\$60) and the prepaid connection pack (less than \$10), one can be a mobile user “for life”.

Africans, even the poor, are willing to communicate with the digital devices available to date in every way possible – so there is no doubt that Africa is part of what I called above the communication society. But what about the information society? What about the knowledge society? In Africa we all experience in our daily life how difficult it is to access even basic information.

The difficulties

It probably takes more time and resources to collect information in Africa than anywhere else in the world. As project co-ordinator of a research programme looking at the impact and effectiveness of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Africa, I experienced first hand how difficult it was for the national teams in all six participating countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Mozambique, Senegal and Uganda) to collect data from key national ICT players. Yet the ICT counterparts in the West made the data readily available to the public via the Web and in various reports.

Partly due to the nonexistent or poor practices in regard to information and data archiving, being accountable to a larger public or publicising corporate information (stock exchanges, annual reports, etc.), the slightest piece of information, when requested, is therefore seen by its holder as sensitive private property that is risky to release.

The worst thing is that it is a short step from a culture of withholding information to that of becoming information-blind. In other words, when we keep on withholding information, we end up being unable to produce information. We lose the culture of surveying, assessing, classifying – in brief, collecting as much information as possible and storing it in a standardized manner, making it available for use, not only to cater for current specific needs, but also for potential and future ones.

Building Africa’s information society requires two kinds of resources: technological and cultural. The cultural resources

contribute to building the symbolic world that gives meaning to the technologies and thus makes them relevant for a group of people at a certain point in time and from their own point of view.

We may have found different ways to communicate as cheaply as possible, but we still have a long way to go to create and use information as an effective asset and a common good that is available in a timely fashion.

Hopefully when and where communication infrastructures become available, the information culture will follow soon.

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