Introduction to the Special Issue on Mobile Societies in Asia-Pacific

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INTRODUCTION

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THE PAPERS

In the first paper, Donner explores the current literature on mobile phone use in the developing world. After Castells et al. (2007), Donner's paper provides the most exhaustive review of mobiles in developmental context currently available. Donner reviews almost 200 studies on mobile phone use in the developing world, representing a wide range of disciplines, and identifies the common themes and major trends in the literature. He divides these studies into two categories. The first category includes studies that focus on the determinants of mobile adoption, studies that assess the role and the social consequences of mobile use, and studies that focus on the interrelationships between mobile technologies and users. The second category contains studies focusing on the effects of mobile phone use on economic development: Do mobile phones promote or hinder economic growth, or complicate it in other ways?

One of the great merits of Donner's paper is that it makes us aware of the range of mobile phone practices in developing countries. The topic also provides an opportunity to explore issues such as development, modernization, and globalization. Donner spotlights points where massive social phenomena intersect with micro-trends; as a consequence, we come to know how the globalization process affects many individual lives, such as those of the migrant worker in China, the middle-class protester in the Philippines, and the urban entrepreneur in Nigeria.

The other three papers focus on implications of the diffusion and appropriation of the mobile phone in Asian countries at the symbolic level and at the level of values structures. Bart Barendgret's paper explores the situation in a developing country—Indonesia—while Gerard Goggin's examines an established industrialized country—Australia. Zhou He's paper looks at China, which is a newly industrialized country. Taken together, these papers illustrate the different stages of economic development and diffusion of mobile communication in Asia-Pacific today.

Barendgret describes the modernization process in Indonesia and the creative ways in which Indonesians have appropriated and domesticated the mobile phone. He shows how mobile technology, which arrived in Indonesia at the end of the Suharto regime, a period of social and cultural openness, has facilitated the development of a youth culture that embraces a cool mobile lifestyle. Barendgret explains how, for urban middle-class Muslims, the mobile phone represents a commitment to modernity. He also

describes how the lower stratum of the population has tried to appropriate this technology through secondhand or "black" devices.

Goggin analyzes, through the prism of the mobile phone, an important aspect of Australia's modernization: the reorientation of its national identity from Europe to Asia. Goggin does not focus on the hybrid narratives that have resulted from the fusion of various national cultures in the course of globalization. He instead explores the shift in Australian national identity—where Australia once considered herself to be a southern representative of the West, she is now increasingly recognizing how her identity has been shaped by Asian social and cultural influences. Goggin sees this reorientation reflected in the diffusion and appropriation of the mobile phone in Australia, which is now conceived by many not only as a country in Asia but as an Asian country.

Finally, Zhou He examines the development of Short Message Service (SMS) in China, which, he argues, operates as a means of mass communication for deviant discourses, such as those of political criticism and ethical defiance. He found that Chinese mobile users contribute to a nonofficial discourse in a variety of ways, ranging from the creation of political satire to the consumption of political "jokes." Thus, within the Chinese context, mobile is not only a tool of personal and work-related communication but also a political instrument. He shows how the mobile phone is used in China to weave a nonofficial discourse, facilitate political involvement, and contribute to the political empowerment of users.

THE BROADER CONTEXT

As Donner reminds us, an examination of the diffusion and appropriation of the mobile phone in developing countries requires a clear understanding of three concepts—"modernities" (or, more recently, "postmodernities"), "industrialization," and "technology"—and their relationships. Barendgret's paper shows that the shift to postmodernity has opened multiple facets of modernity. According to the literature on the shift from modernity to postmodernity (Appadurai, 1990; Arvidsson, 2006; Baudrillard, 1986; Derrida, 1967; Giddens, 1991a, 1991b; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Lyotard, 1979; Tomlinson, 1999), several factors have played a role in the decline of the symbolic structure of modernity: the end of great narratives that control the collective imagination, the fragmentation of genres and tastes, the enormous diversification of supply and demand of cultural products, and the overturning of the relations between material and immaterial work in favor of the latter, among others.

Exposure to industrialization and globalization has different consequences in different societies. In fact, the process of modernization, which derives from industrialization and globalization, is the consequence of a coconstruction carried out by indigenous cultures and societies, on the one hand, and the capitalistic system, on the other hand. Both influence and shape each other. But we often look at the changes that occur in local cultures and societies without paying sufficient attention to the changes that occurred at the same time in the capitalistic system. During the process of modernization, the capitalistic system changes too. If we take into account that capitalism, according to Marx, is a social relationship, it follows that it is subject to change, since it reacts to local cultural and historical contexts.

Paradoxically, capitalism today is both more and less modern than before globalization: more modern because it has enlarged the number of waged workers in the developing world and has spread sophisticated technology; less modern because, as it is faithful only to the surplus-value law, it might demodernize itself in the newly industrialized countries. It does so because it has an internal history that always manages to surface—a history of appropriating working-class energies. In more established industrialized countries, the working class has in the course of time managed to limit the degree of appropriation. When modern capital encounters cultures and social systems with areas of backwardness and despotism, its historical tendency surfaces again. To increase the valorization process, capitalism does not hesitate to put its technological power at the service of the most backward power (as the activities of Google and Microsoft in China illustrate). Consequently, modernity becomes antimodernity, as it reinforces systems and institutions that have been long outmoded in the West. If semislavery becomes a means to obtain plus-value, then semislavery reappears. The fact is that modernization is not the objective of the capitalist process. It is one of the social consequences produced by the negotiation between capital and working classes in those countries that first became industrialized (Hardt & Negri, 2000).

The capitalistic communism of China or "socialism with Chinese characteristics" launched by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s is a case in point. Of course, the coexistence of two opposed systems could be expected to create social tensions and conflicts in contemporary China. The appropriation of the mobile phone by Chinese people provides a platform, as Zhou He's paper describes, for public criticism of political leaders. Another example of modernization "without modernity in classical terms" is that described by Barendregt. In Indonesia, fostering of industrialization, rather than that of a more secular society, led to a process of Islamization and the emergence of the New Muslim. These religious practices and phenomena coexist with, and are even strengthened by, new technologies. But Indonesia is only one example of a tendency that is evident even in established industrialized countries. Throughout the world, postmodern religious hierarchies are using the

mobile phone (and other information and communication technologies [ICTs]) to organize spiritual practices and oppose secularization (Barzilai-Nahon & Barzilai, 2005; Katz, 2006).

After Hegel, to be "modern" has generally meant to follow the spirit of time, that is, the specific moment in which one lives with all its characteristics. If this is modernity, then "modernity" or, more accurately, "postmodernity" should be used in the plural form: "postmodernities." Postmodernities are hybrid constructions emerging from the encounters of very different processes, economic and sociotechnical systems, and cultural and social organizations. In developing or newly industrialized countries, which skip many stages that established industrialized countries experienced during the development of industrialization, postmodernities are shaped by the time lag between social change and technological dissemination (Longo, 2003). If the former provides the impetus for development, then society might be able to remain open and flexible; if the latter prevails, there is the risk that society will become rigid and committed to "irrational" behavior, as Barendgret describes in his paper.

One of the bulwarks of modernity is industrialization, which is becoming a global process. While we are still lacking a complete understanding of industrialization as a global phenomenon, we do know at least three important aspects of the industrialization process.

First, industrialization involves an attack upon tradition, which has established the socioeconomic routine and is the source of its legitimacy. This attack is not limited to the technical, economic, or financial sectors. It is an existential challenge that marks and transforms the ideas and values that uphold social beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. As a result, industrialization produces a shift based on the devalorization of tradition. Tradition, which was previously considered the depository of the best time-honored practices, suddenly is perceived as inert, a burden that must be relinquished. Tradition is now perceived only in its negative aspects. This gives rise to radical changes at social, cultural, and psychological levels and, consequently, to major upheavals. If we look at the actors who are protagonists of this attack against tradition, we may find not only entrepreneurs, the rising bourgeois class, but also those working classes who could take advantage of the industrialization process and the accompanying social processes. The tensions produced by industrialization occur at three levels: Traditional social practices are opposed to rationalization desired from the standpoint of efficiency; highly personalized social relationships, in which individuals and groups perceived themselves as friends or enemies, are opposed to the depersonalized and psychologically neutral social relationships required by more technologically advanced societies (Sombart, 1900); and there are changing boundaries between private and public spheres. Evi-

dence of the difficulty in distinguishing between private and public spheres is still provided by mobile phone use: As Donner's paper illustrates, in developing countries, mobile phone use reveals the intermingling of work and personal relationships.

Second, industrialization is a self-generating process that, as Ferrarotti (1970) notes, has been shown to possess an internal logic. Deng Xiaoping understood this logic very well. By deciding to promote the first industrial experiments in China in the 1980s, he planted the seeds of change in society while avoiding a bloody political battle within the party. He understood that this political decision would result in the gradual dissemination of capitalist values and their attendant social processes and phenomena. The production of commodities leads eventually to the commodification of human beings, but this progression seems primarily technological and so ideologically neutral.

Third, industrialization, as a cumulative and multilinear process, and a fundamental component of the modern world, represents itself as irreversible. A country that now refuses to adapt to industrialization seems to be refusing to belong to the postmodern world.

What is the role of technology in modernization and industrialization? Throughout the world, machines are perceived as contributing to a "rational" environment, not only in the economic sector but also in the domestic sphere and civil society. "Rational" is in quotation marks here because it does not refer to the only possible rationality but to a rationality that is historically and culturally determined and that often springs from the "technician's more intimate experience of the behaviour of matter and mechanisms" rather than simple application of scientific principles (Nye, 2007, p. 10). This rationality is furthermore limited by the fact that the mass appropriation of technology in daily life is accompanied by a deep incomprehension of the technological world. As Longo (2003) argues, almost all people use tools, systems, and devices whose precise functions they do not know, nor are they interested in knowing them. In addition to reinforcing the primacy of rationality (however limited), machines impose a social discipline based on the nexus of cause and effect, the adoption of precise and mechanical measures, and the adaptation and reduction of all aspects of life, such as purposes, activities, needs, conveniences, and amusements, to standardized units (Veblen, 1904). Veblen shows how technology rationalizes the social organization and order, even at the symbolic level and at the level of values structures. ICTs, particularly the mobile phone, contribute to this new social order. But there are always people who profit off the machines to sweep away their anthropomorphic mental habits and negotiate new ways of working and living. After all, Ferrarotti (1970) reminds us that when Marx speaks about machines, he is referring to the factory system, including its social norms and

rules. In other words, technology represents a power structure that unhinges the traditional social structure, but by which it is influenced. If the emblem of modernity is the automobile driver, as Keyserling argues (1949), the emblem of postmodernities might well be the mobile phone user.

The shift to modernity involved a radical transformation of the categorization of the spatial/temporal coordinates. The most fundamental of the psychological and social changes wrought by modernity and industrialization were the transformations of the concepts of space and time: Space was annihilated, and time became subjected to mechanization and acceleration. Mobile phone use has provoked a further reconceptualization of time and space. In this new postmodern scenario, users profited off the mobile phone to put themselves in contact with the rhythms of contemporary life; through it they live in multilayered time, performing several activities at the same time, and they experience a new dimension of presence/absence. The mobile phone, like the fixed phone, annihilates the spatial distance between the caller and the recipient, but, unlike the fixed phone, it does not confine users to a specific and relatively immobile space. This is one of the reasons that users associate mobile phone with global developments, unlike landline phones, which are perceived as more local (Fortunati, 2005). The mobile phone is a tool that allows people to access their relational sphere while moving throughout the world; mobile users perceive themselves as citizens of the world. Nothing is more far from the elaboration of nationalism and from the idea of imaged nation (Anderson, 1983) than the information passing through the mobile network, which primarily consists of personal expressions of emotions or organizational details. The only reference to nationality associated with the mobile phone is the national country codes. While traditional media are still considered purveyors of national identity, the new forms of media—such as digital television and radio, mobiles, and the Internet—have a more international scope. This explains also how, as Goggin describes in his paper, the diffusion of the mobile phone has contributed to the reorientation of the national identity currently underway in Australia.

The writings of Manuel Castells (1996, 2000; Castells et al., 2007) help us to understand another spatial effect produced by modernity and radicalized by globalization: the opposition between the city and the country. The mobile phone use contributes to this opposition as well. Population and technologies are accumulated to the nth degree in the cities, while the countryside is devalued and considered backward. The modernization of space leads to the overshadowing development of certain cities and the reconfiguration of urban space as a result of a complex sociotechnical mechanism in which "automobility" (Urry, 2004) and ICT use reciprocally influence and enhance each other. Urbanization, migration, and diasporas are processes that are made more endurable thanks to the mobile phone, as it creates a bridge between those who leave and those who remain, and sustains the social integration of people who are spatially separated.

There is another important sphere that ICTs' diffusion and use, and especially that of the mobile phone, have radically influenced: freedom (and its corollary, individualization). Freedom is at the core of changes set in motion by industrialization and modernity. The mass appropriation of communication and information technologies, especially the mobile phone, suggests that they convey a sense of empowerment and freedom to the individuals. Several studies have illustrated the role of the mobile phone in enhancing democracy throughout the world (Rheingold, 2002; Nyiri, 2003). In China, for example, the combined use of SMS, e-mails, and the Internet has played a key role in mobilizing people (Lee, 2005). Using these new media, people were able to dodge official sanction, disseminate information, and organize political protests and demonstrations. Other studies, in contrast, have stressed the ways in which technological development furthers capitalist authority and despotism (Panzieri, 1970). Who is right? Probably both. The first group focuses on some potential benefits of technology, and the second, on other negative effects. ICTs, particularly the mobile phone, are no exception. On the one hand, mobiles are vehicles of despotism, enforcing control over also the domestic sphere and "leisure" time. On the other hand, the mobile also presents the chance that its control is technically more difficult than that on other technologies such as the Internet, which opens the possibility of bottom-up creativity and development, as evident in the SMS phenomenon. Zhou He describes this in his paper on China.

This debate on modernization, industrialization, and technology is now merged with that on globalization. From a global perspective, information and communication technologies represent a discontinuous change, since they enable a shift from national economies to an economy that is able to function as a real-time networked unit on a world scale (Castells, 1996, 2000). This is the frame that has allowed the massive migration of capital and industries to the developing world. But it is also the frame that shows how societies in Pacific-Asia contrast or accelerate or stop or accompany capitalist development. In this frame the role of the mobile phone is very prominent and spreads fast from the bottom up, opening at the same time new opportunities for ordinary people.

This special issue, which focuses on mobile communication in a few Asia-Pacific countries, offers an extraordinary fresco of contemporary social realities in that part of the world. It questions the very resistant stereotype that social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions necessarily stand and fall together. It shows instead that these dimensions can develop in different directions and

with different speeds. The complex intermingling between globalization and mobile phones in fact emerges from the desynchronization of all these dimensions. On the other hand, this special issue runs the risk of confining the discussion to a single medium, despite current developments in media integration and transmediality. But it is still necessary to draw attention to the particular features of mobile communication; thousands of researchers are actively studying the effects of computer/Internet use, but only a few hundred have conducted research on the mobile phone.

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