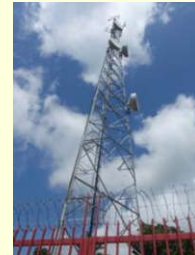


The mobile phone: the new communication drum of Papua New Guinea



by Amanda H A Watson

This presentation covers the findings and implications of the first large, independent research project on mobile phones in PNG.

Specifically, it focuses on mobile telephony in rural communities of PNG during the early days of phone adoption in such places.

This research was granted ethical approval by both Queensland University of Technology in Australia and Divine Word University in PNG.

The presentation draws on data collected and analysed as part of a three-year study in fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Queensland University of Technology.

The researcher previously lived and worked in Madang, PNG, as a lecturer in the Communication Arts Department of Divine Word University for three years.

This presentation examines the role of mobile telephony in rural communities of Papua New Guinea (PNG). It reports on research conducted in the earliest stages of mobile phone adoption in these areas. It explores the ways in which this new technology changes people's lives, social structures and relationships. The research focuses on non-urban communities, which previously had little or no access to modern communication technologies, but which are in some cases still using traditional forms of communication such as drums. It has found that the introduction of mobile telecommunications has generally been viewed positively, although several negative concerns have been strongly felt. Specific benefits related to enhanced communication with relatives and friends living away from home villages, and use of the technology in time-critical emergencies or crises. Difficulties have arisen with respect to the cost of owning and operating a handset, as well as financial and logistical challenges when recharging handset batteries, particularly in areas with no mains electricity supply. Perceived damaging effects of mobile phone access related to sex, crime and pornography.

The changes taking place are described through a social lens, by foregrounding the perceptions of villagers. This is done through reporting of the results of a survey of 748 villagers from ten different villages, plus in-depth interviews with nine people from those villages. The perspectives of eight key informants, such as telecommunication company managers, are also discussed. The sources constantly overlap and agree on the main themes, such as those outlined above. In the case of all ten villages discussed in this presentation, there has never been any landline telephone infrastructure available. Therefore, this research on mobile phones is in effect documenting the first ever access to any kind of phone in these communities.

This research makes a unique contribution to knowledge about the role of communication in PNG, and has implications for policy, practice and theory. In the policy arena, the research aids understanding of the impact which communication sector competition and regulation can have on rural and relatively isolated communities. There are three practical problems which have emerged from the research: cost, battery recharging difficulties and breakage are all major obstacles to uptake and use of mobile telephony in rural communities. Efforts to reduce usage costs, enable easier recharging, and design more robust handsets would allow for increased utilisation of mobile phones for a range of purposes. With respect to the realm of theory, this research sits amongst the most recent scholarship in the mobile phone field, located within the broader communication theory area. In particular, it argues for communication to be valued of itself, rather than as a means to other ends. It suggests that social uses of the technology (rather than functional uses such as searching for jobs or coordinating logistics) mark the key benefit felt by rural villagers in PNG.

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