

Robert J. Foster and Heather A. Horst (Eds.), **The Moral Economy of Mobile Phones: Pacific Islands Perspectives**, Acton, Australia: ANU Press, 2018, 148 pp., \$45 AUD (print), free download.

Reviewed by

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In their edited book, **The Moral Economy of Mobile Phones**, Robert J. Foster and Heather A. Horst take the reader to the South Pacific island nations of Papua New Guinea, Fiji, and Vanuatu to examine how mobile communication has played into the local cultures. The book includes six chapters in addition to two commentary essays and an introduction. The contributing authors are anthropologists from North American and Australian universities. Interestingly, this book is framed around E. P. Thompson's (1967) notion of moral economy. The book contains four chapters that focus on Papua New Guinea, one that examines Fiji, and one that studies Vanuatu.



It is important to note that mobile telephony is not pervasive in this region. Indeed, there is quite low penetration. The International Telecommunications Union notes that in 2016, Papua New Guinea had about 47 subscriptions per 100 people, making it 187th of 202 countries for which there is data. Vanuatu had approximately 81 subscriptions per 100 people (ranked 154th), and Fiji was relatively well ranked at number 85 with 116 subscriptions per 100 people. This limited access to mobile communication is, to some degree, a reflection of the economic situation of people living in this region. The limited access also plays out in the practices that are described in the book.

As noted, E. P. Thompson's notion of moral economy is used as a framing concept. In broad strokes, Thompson suggests that moral economy describes the "confrontations in the marketplace over access (or entitlement) to 'necessities'" (Thompson, 1991, p. 337). It has been elaborated in anthropology to include the use of "nonrational" stratagems when seen from a capitalist stance. They are, however, rational given the situation of the impoverished/disenfranchised individual. This book makes this concept concrete by examining a meeting between the commercial exigencies of the mobile phone operators, the regulatory actions of the governments, and the culturally bound, albeit constrained, demands of the users. In their introduction, Robert J. Foster and Heather A. Horst note that,

. . . while it is certainly important not to reduce phone usage to the automatic outcome of either corporate strategies or state policies, it is equally important to acknowledge that such usage happens in circumstances that users themselves have not chosen. (p. 14)

Horst goes further to elaborate a Fijian notion of moral economy in her chapter "Creating Consumer-Citizens." She examines the corporate strategies of the two mobile phone operators on the island, tracing the degree to which they variously play on the cultural identity and/or the individual as a consumer in their approaches to marketing.

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Three broad themes that arise in the book include the telephonic remapping of space, insight into how the mobile phone becomes a resource that enters into various reciprocal interactions, and how it becomes a conduit that facilitates mediated sociation.

### **The Urge to Communicate and the Remapping of the Social Landscape**

In his chapter, "A Handset Dangling in a Doorway," David Lipset examines mobile phone sharing in a remote Papua New Guinean cluster of villages called Murik that had only marginal mobile coverage. In spite of its poor coverage, residents had a keen desire for connectivity. In her commentary, Margaret Jolly ("Transforming Place, Time and Person?") calls this a "passion for connection" (p. 140). Indeed, these devices facilitate the ability to maintain contact, carry out kin-keeping, and coordinate activities. The strong desire to use the device is also seen, albeit in a somewhat more complex way, in the chapter by Jorgensen entitled "Toby and 'the Mobile System,'" where we receive a vignette of Toby, who sees satanic and apocalyptic potentials in the mobile phone. One would think that this would limit his use. However, in spite of these potential threats, he owned and used a mobile phone to, among other things, cultivate "phone friends" and in one case to save himself from a dangerous situation. Thus, in spite of some caveats, the book documents a strong desire for connectivity.

Coming back to Lipset's remote Murik villages, the residents were quick to learn the particular locations that had good reception. In some cases, these were on the beach, up a small ladder near a particular tree, or on a platform built between mangrove trees. In one case, a telephonic "sweet spot" was inside a home between the kitchen and bedroom. The residents had hung a mobile phone in this doorway and it was viewed in the village as a quasi-public device. According to Lipset, the residents of the home saw their provision of the device as a service to the community. Clearly, the microgeography of the mobile phone ran counter to traditional notions of the home by imposing a communicative/commercial dimension onto the space. In his commentary, "Affective Technologies in the Age of Creative Destruction," Jeffrey Mantz refers to Lipset's study and notes that this quasi-common mobile phone reinforced "enduring social bonds and a sense of 'collective responsibility'" (p. 134) among the villagers.

### **Phone/Resource Sharing**

Lipset's discussion of a quasi-shared phone was one dimension of social sharing. Another aspect of sharing is seen in chapter 5's "Working the Mobile" by Daniela Kraemer, and discussed in Jolly and Mantz's commentaries. Rather than Lipset's gift-like pooling of a mobile handset, Kraemer examines how young adults in Port Vila, Vanuatu, exchanged talk-time credits. Where Lipset's handset was a common resource for the community, by contrast, Kraemer's rather impoverished informants used airtime exchanges as a way to garner status and social respect among peers.

Informed by cultural ideas and practices in which the exchange of items—be they mats, pigs or money—is key to a person's social development, relationships, status, growth prestige, fame and power, they are exchanging what they do have access to—mobile credit and talk time— in order to develop and manage their social worlds. (p. 99)

Giving and receiving talk-time credits was used to mark status. Further, these credits had the advantage of being easy to use in the calibration of a relationship. The more credits given, the more important the relationship. Here we can see Thompson's moral economy. There is the conversion of rational concepts (talk-time) onto the contextual needs of the users. In his commentary, Mantz notes that the exchange of talk-time gave disenfranchised youth purchase, however tenuous, in the local social order.

Continuing the discussion of monetized social relations, Robert J. Foster describes the interactions between the mobile operators and their customers via the use of top-up subscriptions in his chapter "Top-Up." Foster is interested to trace the way that top-up subscriptions facilitate a particular business model, but that this form of marketing also rationalizes customers' social interaction. He notes that the customers assume the management of their phone credits and thereby have to assume an accompanying temporal discipline. Again, we see the Thompsonian moral economy in action.

### ***Gesfaia*, or Random Phone Calls and the Cultivation of "Phone Friends"**

Several of the chapters describe what Lipset reports being called *gesfaia* or "phone friendships." These are established by placing random phone calls in hopes of finding someone who will chat. Dan Jorgensen (chapter 3), Daniela Kraemer (chapter 5), and Jolly in her commentary also discuss the same practice. This is often done with the goal of passing time during the evenings or seeking quasi-romantic relations and harmless flirting, often without the threat of actually meeting the interlocutor. It is also a way where one can live out a somewhat enlarged sense of him/herself. For example, they can perhaps brag about nonexistent jobs, status, resources, etc.

In some cases, these phone friends can call one another for many years. The friendship can include various forms of social and even monetary support. In her chapter, "HIV, Phone Friends and Affective Technology in Papua New Guinea," Holly Wardlow explores how a woman with HIV used this form of mediated searching to find a conversation partner with whom she had a long-standing relationship.

Making and receiving these random calls is not without risk. When making a random call, the caller might receive an animated chewing out for the disturbance. For the person taking the call, an unknown number on their phone may cause suspicion on the part of a jealous partner. It may expose them to unwanted propositions, and in the minds of some, for example Toby in the article by Jorgensen, taking such a call can grant access to witches or other supernatural evil forces.

Picking up on the "passion for connection" noted above, the practice of establishing phone friends speaks to a type of latent desire for sociation that is enabled by the affordances of the mobile phone. Tracing this back to the notion of moral economy, *gesfaia* is a "nonrational" stratagem that has been developed within the rational/commercial telephony system. In a broad sense, the mobile communication system was developed in order to facilitate commerce and to help coordinate logistics and a variety of other instrumental purposes. In addition to these ends, the material here shows how it can also be co-opted for the purposes of establishing status, to participate in the local gifting in remote villages, and to allow people to play out their desire for noncommitted social interaction.

Not all the chapters use Thompson's lens in their analysis. This is perhaps to be expected. Nonetheless, the agile reader will see this dimension of the material appear throughout the book. The community of scholars, and not least, the community of mobile communication scholars owe Foster and Horst a debt of gratitude for bringing together this wonderful look into the practices of these users in this particular corner of the globe.

### **References**

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