

The unpredictable mobile phone

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A year-long ethnographic study of the use of mobile phones in Jamaica was conducted during 2004. Our findings, which are almost the exact opposite of the expectations that appear in The Economist and other sources in early 2005, are that, in Jamaica at least, the phones are not used to obtain jobs or to help individuals become entrepreneurs. For quite different reasons, however, mobile phones have become central to the survival strategies of the lowest income population. To understand why this should be, we need to examine how the phone fits within other forms of communication, and how both the phone and the phone call are evaluated. This is tantamount to asking how one person values their communication with another and under what conditions does communication become an end in itself?

1. What can phones do for low income families?

In 2004 DFID, the British Department for International Development, funded a four-country ethnographic study on the impact of new media technology in helping the most impoverished to improve their welfare. The question that DFID posed regarding the relationship between information and communication technologies (ICTs) and poverty was at the time quite open, and remains so today. This paper reports on the study of Jamaica which was undertaken by the author and a post-doctoral colleague, Heather Horst.

An ethnography requires the researcher to spend at least one year in the community being studied, to live with families during that period and to work in the local language participating in the lives of the people in that community as much as possible. The assumption made by anthropology is that only such an engagement can give a proper understanding of how and why people believe and practice in the particular ways of that community, producing insights that are of an altogether different order and depth from that produced by alternative forms of social science research such as questionnaires and focus groups.

In this case the study resulted in a monograph [1], some results from which will be summarised here. Horst spent the entire year in Jamaica having previously worked there on several other projects over the course of ten years. She lived for six months with a family in a rural site near the centre of the island and spent the other six months living with a family in Portmore, an outer district of the capital Kingston. Both are low-income areas with high levels of unemployment. I lived

with those same families for part of the year. Quite unlike Trinidad [2], low-income Jamaicans made practically no use of the Internet. As a result our study was entirely on the impact of the mobile phone.

The mobile phone has spread at such an astonishing pace that 2004 was probably the first opportunity to make even an initial assessment of its impact on the lowest income groups because it was only then spreading down to that population both in Jamaica and many other parts of the world. As such it was entirely possible that this was a new gimmick that would represent a considerable cost and ultimately a drain on these very low incomes. Alternatively it might represent a considerable boon and genuinely new way for people to improve upon their incomes. One problem, however, is already made evident by posing the question in these terms. Is income itself the best measure of people's well-being? One of the arguments that anthropologists, such as Mary Douglas, have been waging with progressive attempts to improve our measures of human welfare is with regard to the evaluation of communication in its own right. Under the influence of economists such as Amartya Sen, the United Nations had been opening up its index of national well-being beyond the single criteria of income to include factors such as education and health. Yet so far communication remains largely understood as a means to such ends rather than as an end in itself. Douglas [3], by contrast, argued that communication is such a basic human concern that it needed to be valued in its own terms, and earlier anthropological studies of the Caribbean with titles such as 'The man of words in the West Indies' had examined the place of conversation in society and showed in considerable detail the importance the

imperative to communicate seems to have within this region, a significance that does not reduce easily to some other imperative.

In the first part of this paper I examine the relationship between the phone and income generation in terms that would address the concerns of economists, and the established questions of organisations such as DFID. I hope, however, that by the end of the paper we have also approached the deeper issue of how to evaluate communication in its own right.

2. The rapid take-up of mobile phones in Jamaica

Initial research on the impact of the mobile phone on a regional basis has indeed already suggested a wide range of differences related to local patterns of usage [4]. That this is true even within the Caribbean, is evident from the contrast between Jamaica and Trinidad [2], Trinidad's population is approximately half that of Jamaica's 2.6 million [5] but with nearly three times its per capita income in 2003, US\$7260 as compared to Jamaica's US\$2760 [6]. The ethnography of Internet usage in Trinidad demonstrated great enthusiasm for the Internet in 1999, accompanied by considerable sharing of access, while our study of Jamaica in 2004 revealed much less interest in, and indeed sharing of, Internet resources. While government statistics suggest 7% penetration of the Internet in Trinidad and 3% for Jamaica¹, our evidence is that the actual usage is considerably greater in Trinidad [5].

With respect to the use of mobile phones there were also clear differences, but in the opposite direction. According to the Trinidad Guardian, by the end of 2004 Trinidad had approximately 600 000 mobile phone subscribers, whereas there were 2000 000 subscribers in Jamaica [8]. The latter figure reflected an average of three phones per household. Given the much higher income levels of Trinidadians and their sense of themselves as a first world country [2], these numbers were quite surprising.

Many factors explain Jamaicans' preference for mobile phones over the Internet, and the differences with Trinidad. One was the response of each government to the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector prompted by the World Bank and others. The Trinidadian government encouraged the development of the Internet and computers, with interest free loans to public sector workers that, combined with much higher income levels, resulted in more affordable computers. By contrast it was slow to

¹ The Jamaican figure comes from a survey by Don Anderson's Market Research Ltd, carried out in 2003 for JAMPRO, the Jamaican promotion corporation. This suggested that there were 95 000 Internet users of which 60% are residential [7].

grant licences to the mobile phone sector. The Jamaican government showed less appreciation of the potential of the Internet but was quick to grant licences for the mobile phone industry.

The role of companies has been as important as that of the state. As it has for much of the Caribbean [9], Cable and Wireless dominated the telecommunications industry in Jamaica over the past 100 years. As the incumbent corporation Cable and Wireless have attempted, as would most companies, to defend their business position. In some cases this may have led to the incumbent being regarded as a conservative force impeding the development of the telecommunications industry [2, 10]. This proved decisive when, after licences were issued, they came face to face with the modernising commercial strategy adopted by Digicel, a mobile phone company that capitalised on its earlier success in developing media in Ireland, using the profits to enter the Caribbean market [11]. Since commencing operations in 2001, Digicel have achieved extraordinary success in Jamaica. By the end of 2004 it had sold nearly 1.5 million mobile phones in this country of only 2.6 million people. Digicel created an impressive marketing campaign led by a highly experienced Jamaican, Harry Smith. Smith successfully used many populist images, such as Rasta or 'roots' colours, as well as prominent sponsorship of sports and entertainment such as 'Rising Stars', the local equivalent of Britain's 'Pop Idol' or 'American Idol' in the USA. Through the course of many interviews, it became clear that Digicel was capitalising on its position as the newcomer and was exploiting an intense dislike of a long-term incumbent that had emerged.

Clearly then one might have argued that the comparative success of the Internet in Trinidad and the mobile phone in Jamaica rests entirely with the actions of the state and the respective companies. But this analysis misses another story entirely, one that emerges from the ethnography of usage. We argue that there are other grounds that account for the differences in the take-up in technologies within and between different regions. Furthermore, ethnographic study can indicate quite specific local forms of use, in this case a particular pattern of Jamaican usage of the mobile phone we call 'link-up' (see Fig 1). Understanding this process reveals not only how the mobile phone connects Jamaicans at home and abroad, but also how the study of the mobile phone connects what might otherwise be seen as disparate genres of anthropological research. I will start this more contextual analysis of usage with the more economic concerns of income generation and then look at the wider social networks in which the phone has become embedded. But one of the main points is to show how difficult it is to separate these out as distinct areas of concern.



Fig 1 'Link-up' in Jamaica.

3. Why *The Economist* got it wrong — at least for Jamaica

The question posed by DFID would generally be understood as a question about whether the phone helps ultimately to generate income. The logic was made evident in an issue of the *The Economist* which fore-grounded this topic. The cover photograph featured a young African boy holding to his ear a fake mobile phone made of mud under the title of 'The real digital divide'. The accompanying article, one of several in that issue examining the role of technology in mitigating the 'digital divide' concludes that '... rather than trying to close the digital divide through top-down IT infrastructure projects, governments in the developing world should open their telecommunications markets. Then firms and customers, on their own and even in the poorest countries, will close the divide themselves' [12].

In effect, *The Economist* is making two main points. The first favours the mobile phone over the Internet as a vehicle for the elimination of poverty. The argument, repeated over several articles, is that the Internet requires too many skills and too much knowledge to be the force that can actually bring people out of poverty in the first place. Based on inspection of development-based facilities provided in South India the magazine claims that '... rural ICTs appear particularly useful to the literate, to the wealthier and to the younger — those, in other words, who are at the top of the socio-economic hierarchy. In the 12 villages surrounding Pondicherry, students are among the most frequent users of the Knowledge Centres' [13]. The second claim is that the mobile phone, supplied through the market, is what actually provides people with greater income: plenty of evidence suggests that the mobile phone is the technology with the greatest impact on development

[14]. The topic is also discussed in its weekly page called 'Economics Focus' where economists assert that '... in a typical developing country, an increase of ten mobile phones per 100 people boosts GDP growth by 0.6 percentage points' [14].

If one follows the arguments set out in *The Economist*, the internal discussions of DFID and other bodies which are largely influenced by the discipline of economics, the tendency is to assume that in order to best understand the potential of the mobile phone as a contribution to the elimination of poverty, we need to consider first its contribution to increasing GDP in particular, and income generation more generally. In more specific terms the expectation is, firstly, that the phone enables individuals to become entrepreneurs. They no longer need the capital required for having an office or fixed base, since they now have another mobile address in the form of the phone that allows them to become reachable to potential suppliers or customers at any time. If they do not develop as entrepreneurs at least the phone would allow them to obtain employment by networking to find out about available work.

Through ethnographic observation we were able to investigate these expectations and came to conclusions that differed markedly from such assumptions and revealed a much more complex relationship between the spread of the phone and the development of income. While in some of the other countries being investigated people do indeed use the phone to become entrepreneurs or obtain work, in Jamaica such usage among low income individuals was decidedly rare. There is no major new spirit of enterprise based on the phone, with two exceptions. One was the music business. Almost half the men we knew under age 40 did see some new potential in playing music, hiring bands, making CDs and somehow making it 'big' in secular or religious music. There is no sign that this is actually happening, but it demonstrates that where there is an imagination of a certain kind of commercial future, then phones are understood immediately to be a means to transform these into possibilities. Another exception would be the taxi driving business which is so integrally linked to the phone as to form a vital part of what we would call their communicative ecology. That is to say one type of communication, that of transport, is intimately linked with another. Here the difference made by the phone is substantial.

These are exceptional cases. The vast majority of low income individuals (unlike the Jamaican middle class) did not use the phone for entrepreneurial activities, unless these were already in place prior to the spread of the phone. Similarly the phone was not important in obtaining employment. Although there were cases of people being told about job adverts by phone, the

general consensus was that this was a very minor use of the phone simply because it was felt that the vast majority of jobs were accessed through social connections and patronage and not through simply matching opportunity to qualifications. We therefore concluded that the expected opportunities for income generation through the phone have largely failed to materialise.

Had we remained narrowly focused on the question of income generation then we would have concluded that the impact was disappointingly slight. In fact we came to regard the phone as having a major and positive impact on the struggle for survival by the very lowest income groups in Jamaica. We were able to explain why the phone is made a priority by people living in conditions of poverty, or indeed destitution. In terms of DFID's priority of poverty alleviation, the mobile phone could be said to have proved a highly effective mechanism.

4. The role of the mobile phone in low income Jamaican families

As part of our research we made very detailed investigations of the budgets of low income families in both rural and urban settings. We would go back day after day and examine expenditure and income on each day until we felt we had reached a point where our data for income and consumption matched, which is something that is certainly not true of official statistics about budgets. As one goes deeper and deeper into the daily budgets of low-income households and considers the way they simply get by from day to day, one starts to see why the phone, so far from being peripheral or an additional expense, is actually the new heart of economic survival. For low income individuals, what finally matters are not earnings that come from employment, or incomes that come from entrepreneurial activity and sales; they do not possess such income. What really matters is the support that comes from other people; from those that 'have it'. 70% of the households in our low income urban site received money from others, including other family members, boyfriends and partners, baby-fathers and friends in Jamaica and abroad. 48% received over one-third of their income from others and 38% of the households surveyed survived exclusively through social networks and the patronage of others. In our rural site, small scale farming plays a significant role in the economy, but even here 34% meet their day-to-day needs exclusively through their social networks, which include immediate family, extended family, boyfriends, girlfriends, neighbours, acquaintances and a host of friends.

The bottom line in both our urban and rural sites is that over a third of households have no 'income' at all in the sense of anything they earn by their labour or their

sales. They exist only through their ability to obtain money from others. This is perhaps an extreme example, but it shows that in Jamaica at any rate, the difference between being destitute and not being destitute is having friends or family that you can call upon in a time of need, even if it is US\$1 for transport to visit a friend who may have no visible financial prospects. What poor people really lack is not so much food, but these critical social networks. The mobile phone is therefore the ideal tool for a Jamaican trying to create the ever-changing social networks which Jamaicans feel are ultimately more reliable than a company, employer or even a parent or spouse alone. This feature, perhaps more than any other, represents the critical economic impact of the mobile phone in Jamaica.

As many studies of poverty have shown, the problem is that people in such conditions are in an almost constant state of crisis posed by every new demand for funds, whether this is a school uniform for a child or filling a prescription given by a doctor. There is simply no surplus of funds available for additional or unanticipated expenditures. A great many of the short stories that punctuate our monograph are demonstrations of the effectiveness of the phone in resolving these crises. Individuals and households in crisis constantly use their mobile phone to deal with immediate needs, often scrolling down their phone lists, not just to see who might 'have it' but who might 'have it at that particular point of time'. So the primary impact of the mobile phone on poverty is through the changing temporality of low level redistribution, which can now be achieved quickly and effectively, whether through a remittance via Western Union, someone sending up a small sum with a taxi driver, or the redistribution of micro-credit through texting phone card numbers. The last is important because at this level of poverty the redistribution of the very means sufficient to make a phone call is required before the phone can then be used to solicit funds in dealing with that crisis.

Our conclusion at this level is that the mobile phone is highly effective for ameliorating the worst forms of suffering associated with poverty. It has become integral to a system where our careful analysis of micro-budgets shows that more than half of household income is accounted for by who you know and not what you do. So the mobile phone is not much used for making money, but it is vital to getting money. There is then an interesting connection between these two observations. In many respects the relative lack of entrepreneurship among low-income people throughout the Caribbean has been associated with what might be called economic individualism. The degree to which money remains associated with the individual and not with the household means that even the small amount of capital

represented by the household as aggregate is not available for investment. This lack of capital is a major factor in the lack of entrepreneurship and the mobile phone appears to exacerbate this trend. The mobile phone then seems to reinforce the tendency to distribute income within low-income areas from those who at any given time 'have it' to those who 'have not', often through the intervening mechanism of gender relations.

With respect to the traditional expectations of welfare and development economics as reflected by the agenda of DFID or the journalism of *The Economist*, we have an important conclusion. There is a general expectation that technology will assist in the alleviation of poverty by becoming a foundation for new forms of entrepreneurialism and income generation that ultimately will be reflected in aggregate figures such as GDP. However, our evidence suggests that this conflates what can become radically opposed trends. The very fact that the mobile phone is used for the immediate amelioration of suffering is closely linked to the degree to which it is not part of any such development of entrepreneurialism. The money that might have been used for capital accumulation is instead filtered downwards to help alleviate regular crises of poverty. This more effective redistribution downwards to the resolution of small-scale crises of poverty reduces still further the pool of capital available for any kind of investment that might be employed in actually making money. If the phone does help with income generation, and thus GDP, it is likely that it does so for those who already have the capital and education to work from a much higher baseline. Our conclusion for the mobile phone in Jamaica would follow *The Economist's* argument for the Internet — that it probably requires too high a level of prior capital of various kinds to make this kind of impact. Contrary to the assumption implicit in the argument made by *The Economist*, this turns out to be precisely because it is effective in poverty alleviation.

The above is typical of the findings of ethnography. It is not just that one finds different answers, but often one finds that the problem was that the original question was posed inappropriately for the case under study. Having made this point I now want to look at other quite unexpected consequences for the more detailed usage of phones. As a bridge between economic concerns and phone use there is the question of the phone bill. If Jamaicans prefer to think of budgets and economic relations in individual rather than household terms this has consequences for the way the bill itself is understood and experienced. One of the unintended effects of the introduction of the mobile phone was the way it helps Jamaicans out of the dilemma created by the land line. The problem with a

land line is that the bill came in the form of a monthly statement that concerned an object shared by all family members. This was often the cause of considerable quarrelling and intra-family friction because of disputes as to who had been responsible for particular calls and how the bill should be apportioned between members of the family. Indeed this is one of the reasons why the dominant phone company, Cable and Wireless became an object of dislike among much of the population, as would be evident from newspaper coverage during this time, and from our own recorded interviews. This was not necessarily because of any wrong doing by the company itself. It was simply that when the billing system became the cause of many quarrels and disputes within the household and family, it was easier to shift the blame for these internal disputes on to the company and collectively accuse them of cheating and swindling the household, rather than face the fact that if the sums did not add up, the blame would need to be with individual members of the household themselves who were not owning up to their personal use of the collective phone.

This was one of the reasons why when Digicel came to the market it was deluged with demand (Fig 2). Its success is particularly astonishing when one considers that initial conditions made it difficult for any new company to emerge, because initially the cost of phoning the new mobiles from a land line started at something like forty times the cost of phoning another land line. When people working for Digicel were asked about their immediate success, the reason they most commonly gave us was that they introduced the idea of charging for phone calls per second rather than per minute. The significance of this change only becomes apparent when one considers another figure which they kindly supplied to us during our fieldwork in 2004, which is that the average length of a Jamaican mobile phone call is 19 seconds. Why so short?

5. The value of a phone call

If one of the major reasons we argue the mobile phone spread with such rapidity was that it allowed families to replace the collective billing of land-lines with the individualised billing of a mobile phone, this in turn had another unexpected consequence. One result was that the person making the phone call was now almost always the person paying for the phone call, and this was evident to both sides of the conversation. This meant in turn that the phone call itself became an object of explicit exchange between the two which could be evaluated directly by reference to the cost of a call. As such we might expect that the phone call would be subject to precisely these cultural differences in the way people equate relationships with other forms of value such as money. Let me illustrate this with a contrast. I



Fig 2 Digicel — the leading player in Jamaica.

was recently talking to a Greek man about his use of the phone during courtship. He noted with some pride that he was spending US\$1000 a month. The point was that this expressed a core Greek conception of love and masculinity. That a man in love must give no thought at all to such vulgar things as cost and consequence, because passion dictates otherwise. In this case he was showing this through complete disregard of the expenditure involved in calling his beloved frequently and for long international conversations. In Greece he was being a complete man. In Jamaica such an individual would be regarded a complete fool, and the woman in question would probably lose any respect she might once have had for him.

In Jamaica the skill that is valued is rather how one can keep a relationship going based on the minimal amount of expenditure possible and indeed if at all possible to have that expenditure taken up by someone else. This is not a question of being generous or mean. It is a different sense of the nature of value. So for example, mobile phone conversations in Jamaica have been pretty much stripped of the normal conventions and etiquette of conversation. There is no polite greeting, and there is often no ending at all; maybe just a word such as 'alright', or 'later'. Each recognises the importance of keeping the call to a minimal cost. The temptation is to see this lack of etiquette and extensive short phone calling as an innovation caused by the mobile phone. In the case of the lack of etiquette this may well be the case. But with respect to the form of phone usage this would be entirely mistaken.

On the contrary the tradition of Jamaica was always one of highly extensive contacts based on occasional and brief social links, which only become operationalised at certain moments of need. Further details of this are given in Horst and Miller [15].

A key point here is that we can easily assume that because the land line was invented before the mobile phone, we come to regard the land line as somehow more traditional and the mobile phone as the more modern and unprecedented. At least in Jamaica this gets everything back to front. In most respects it is the mobile phone that fits smoothly with traditional Jamaican ideas of individual-based networks, and it was the land line that fitted awkwardly and caused problems. While we were doing fieldwork, a high proportion of families in our study were not just adopting mobile phones they were also giving up land lines.

About 98% of calls in Jamaica are made on the basis of pre-paid cards. Phone contracts are almost unknown outside of a wealthy few. This allows people to keep control over their expenditures. It also allows for the development of the micro-exchanges within families or between friends that have been described. It is common, for example, to beg a card often while on the phone. You simply request that the person at the other end scratches off the number on the pre-paid card and tells you what it is. This allows you to continue the phone call, but using the other person's credit. Alternatively individuals beg the remaining credit on a phone. Many people will make a check after every call to see how much credit remains. In other words, gifting, trading and begging phone credit can represent a micro-exchange down to just a few cents.

It is perhaps rare for anthropologists to be so fortunate as to have their ideas tested out by the phone companies themselves, but in this case we were very lucky. Just as we were coming to realise that the dominant concern was how one kept relationships going with minimal expense, preferably off-loaded on to the recipient of the call, Digicel introduced a new facility. Midway through 2004 Digicel responded to their own observations of such activities by adding a new facility they called 'callme'. This allowed a person with less than JA\$3 (about US 5c) on their phone to contact up to 21 other persons a week in the hope that the person they were calling would agree to accept the cost of the call on their credit. Within a few short months, *callme* accounted for over 80% of all text messaging. Indeed by the end of fieldwork when many people referred to texts they most often meant *callme* texts. This in turn reinforced the kind of quasi-kinship link many people felt they had with Digicel as a company that sympathetically cared for the poor since this was seen, not as a form of exploitation, but as form of respect for the ways low income Jamaicans behaved. Digicel also helped foster this identification by being lenient in not cutting off phones that remained unused or were without credit. It also followed from the integration of relatively low cost subsidised handsets as a common gift between friends and relatives at birthdays and

Christmas and also between Jamaicans living abroad and in Jamaica itself. *Callme* was viewed as ensuring that even those with no credit could still find a way to use their phones for important conversations and emergencies. In this manner the integration of micro-economy is also experienced as a kind of emotional economy of identification between the formal and informal economic sectors.

At this point we have reached the equation with which this paper began. How can we start to consider the way communication itself is valued, as an end in itself rather than just a means? *Callme* highlights the question of evaluating both the call and thereby in some senses the person in terms of money. Is it worth paying for a call, how long is it worth talking to them for, and in this case is it worth paying for them to call you? The last follows in the earlier tradition of a collect call, which *callme* in some ways replicates. As I have noted, in Jamaica it is expected, rather than rejected, that relationships are seen as having value that is commensurate with monetary value, and as such the mobile phone fits well within, rather than disrupts the bringing together of these two concepts of value — the measured and the intimate.

One of the most popular anthropological concepts to be adopted by non-anthropologists undertaking sociological analysis is the concept of the gift and its associated principle of reciprocity as originally analysed by Mauss and others [16—18]. For example it was recently applied to the analysis of phone usage by Taylor and Harper [19]. We spent considerable time and effort examining the consequences of *callme*, which we assumed would result in some sense of reciprocity and fairness akin to traditional anthropological treatments of the gift and reciprocity. But the evidence did not support our interpretation. Certainly we could find quotes that suggested a negative attitude towards the use of *callme*, particularly in terms of men's attempts to use this with women that they may be interested in. As an attractive young woman describes one of the men saved in her phone who sent her a *callme* text:

I think it was really cheap of him, if you want to talk to me, buy some credit simple as that. Basically I just don't like the idea, and sometimes it's not even important when you do call them back, 'me — just a call to see if you are alright'.

So at the extremes, people could get a reputation for abusing this system, which would then imply an expectation of reciprocity. But compared to other places where we lived or have worked we were surprised how rare this calculative sense of reciprocity appeared to be. More common were sentiments such as 'because I do it too', 'it's just that funds run low', 'everybody has

it rough'. Low income Jamaicans are quite prepared to give on a small scale in ways that depend not on expectations of reciprocity but on a general sense that giving is a further opportunity to keep a wide spectrum of relationships open. What matters to most people is to forge and maintain extensive social connectedness. So relationships remain asymmetrical without expectations of reciprocity. This is acceptable because networking is seen as having value in its own right independent of any gain that might accrue from the exercise.

6. Conclusions

The conclusion that we draw from this study is that we should be very careful when interpreting the way people equate relationships with money. The problem is that often the social scientists used to come from countries such as the US and the UK where the two are often defined in opposition, so that when we see people being directly equated with money we see this as the 'economic' sphere of life, rather than strictly the social sphere. But this is the wrong interpretation when applied to another society where these relationships are seen differently. Instead we are now pointed in yet another direction by the logic of the research. The critical issue in Jamaica seems to be the establishment of extensive social networks even when there is no immediate gain or reciprocity involved through their development. This gives a context to the earlier question about the value of communication. We could easily reduce the desire for communication to the needs of those in poverty, to their ability to get in touch with taxis or put pressure on relatives abroad to send remittances which is now one of the main sources of income. But actually these networks develop irrespectively of whether one can identify such purposes or even when there is nothing at stake except another address to put in one's phone.

In Jamaica, social networking is not particularly related to kinship, nor to reciprocity. This raises a key question. Because if people were only obtaining funds from their kin, then we would probably feel we do not need to think much about why people are giving them this money. We would simply assume it is part of their obligations to each other as kin. But as noted in the case of *callme* the surprising thing is perhaps not why people beg credit from each other but why they agree to give it. This constant requesting would probably not last very long if it was rarely if ever successful. What became clear to us is that it is very successful because most low-income Jamaicans give money on occasions that at first glance seem inexplicable.

This culture of unexpected giving is important in helping us avoid the simple conclusion that economic

factors are somehow more basic and more causative than other factors in accounting for how the phone is used. Again and again it seemed that social networking possess its own imperative. Individuals seem to see communication and networking as values in themselves and projects in themselves. Similarly giving was itself often seen as a means of creating a link to other persons and was in a sense parasitic on the desire to expand networks of acquaintances. While networking is vital in understanding coping strategies, the implications of cause and effect could also be reversed — people give and take not just because they need to do so, but also in order to facilitate connectedness. So if our problem is to understand why people give to other people in circumstances when there is no evident reason for them to do so, we can account for this by saying that they give money in order to create the connections, not simply that they develop connections in order to obtain money.

So the story has gone full circle. We started by looking at the economic benefits of the mobile phone, but by the end we are coming to see that the economic elements of people's lives may themselves be as much a means to facilitate communication itself, which now finally emerges as an end in itself. This is surely a pretty fundamental issue in thinking about the phone, mobile or otherwise. To both understand it and appreciate it, we need to find ways to evaluate it, where the term evaluation does not imply reducing it to economic or other interests. As Douglas and Ney [3] assert, '... a social being has one prime need — to communicate'.

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