Introduction to the Special Section

**Mobile Communication in Asia: Issues and Imperatives**

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This article introduces and provides the context for the themed section on mobile communication in Asia. It suggests that much work remains to be done in adequately grasping the new mobile, mediated face of communication in the very diverse Asian region. It also suggests that such a new direction in research needs to go hand in hand with rethinking the conceptual and theoretical bases of mobile, and indeed, Internet and computer-mediated communication.

Key words: mobile phones, Asia, mobile media, smartphones, Internet.

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By the end of 2013, worldwide mobile phone subscriptions had reached 6.8 million. Over half of this total, approximately 3.5 billion subscriptions, were to be found in the Asia-Pacific region (ITU, 2014). To be sure, this summary figure is impressive — yet it tells us little about the scale, scope, depth, complexity, and distinctiveness of the unfolding career of new forms of mobile communication in the Asia-Pacific region. This special issue aims to contribute to the emerging research agenda, and in this introduction we explain the paradox of how so much of the mobile face of new mediated communication has to do with Asia, and yet how much relatively little this has been reflected in the communications research enterprise and its fundamental underpinnings.

To start with, it is important to observe that four economic and geopolitical powerhouses in the Asian region have been in the vanguard of the development of mobile communication and media from the 1970s onwards.

Japan pioneered many of the technologies associated with cellular mobile devices: It made key contributions to first-generation mobile networks and handsets; in the 1990s, it was one of the first countries, where the Internet — and the watchword of this journal, computer-mediated communication (CMC) — were to be notably encountered on mobile phones; mobile social software, the forerunner of today's mobile, social, and locative media, was pioneered, with iconic devices such as Lovegety; in the early
2000s, the camera phone was invented and first shipped with mobile handsets in Japan; the forerunner of apps and mobile commerce can be found in the i-Mode ecosystem pioneered by the carrier DoCoMo (Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005). For its part, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) was the test bed for various technical and social innovations (Kim, 2005), including mobile television, mobile games (part of Korean’s teeming online gambling culture), early social network systems such as Cyworld, camera phone culture, locative media (Hjorth, 2009), and more troubling developments such as surveillance and repression (Lee, 2012).

In the 2000s, China and India have emerged as the mobile communication titans to watch. Mainland China’s sheer market size makes it the biggest single global market. There are its fertile range of mobile devices (“shanzhai,” copy-cat culture of clone phones to the category-disrupting Xiaomi smartphones that are affordable, yet powerful), cornucopia of applications (microblogging, check-in program such as Jiepang, and vogue messaging program WeChat) (Hjorth & Arnold, 2013), mobile-supported patterns of migration and urbanization (Law 2012; Wallis, 2013), class formations (Qiu, 2009), and when the other Chinas — Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, plus the wider Chinese diaspora — are added into the mix, it is unsurprising that Chinese mobile cultures alone stand to shift our collective understanding of directions in mobile communication. India is now coming into focus, as another massive Asian market with mobiles at the centre of its communication (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013).

Besides those four Asian countries, Indonesia and the Philippines also stand out for the sheer size and growth potential of their mobile communication markets, as well as the many unique mobile communication services that are deployed in the two countries. Notably, to serve Indonesia’s sizeable Muslim population, mobile apps have emerged to enable devotees to read and search Islamic supplications, and to keep tabs on accurate prayer times. As well, the growth of the Philippine diaspora, anchored by the vast number of Filipino overseas contract workers employed around the world, has also led to a flourishing of mobile remittance services that expedite the transfer of funds that in turn support the maintenance of family ties (see for example Madianou & Miller, 2011 and Thomas & Lim, 2011).

The invocation of the Asian character and trajectory of mobile communication — especially in our conjuncture when mobiles fuse with Internet, and other forms of CMC—is a commonplace. Asia is widely regarded as a region that has enthusiastically embraced information technology. Furthermore, in many Asian countries, technology penetration is bolstered by concerted state support in educational initiatives and ICT infrastructure (Baskaran & Muchie, 2006; Cortada, 2012; Wilson, 2004). This observation is especially true of the region’s adoption and appropriation of the mobile phone, the affordability, versatility and ubiquity of which has had a discernible impact. Various noteworthy uses and ground-breaking applications of the mobile phone have emerged from both urban and rural parts of Asia. In tandem with the promise and possibility of smartphones (Watkins, Hjorth, & Koskinen, 2012), pressing challenges are emerging for consumers, industries and governments alike.

When one scratches the surface of the research and scholarship concerning mobiles in Asia, a number of puzzling things emerge — that have motivated this themed section on smartphones in Asia. Particularly with the sudden sharp rise of mobile Internet usage in Asia (an increase of 192.5% between 2010 and 2012) (TechBlog, 2012), the region’s mobile communication markets offer unique opportunities for breadth and depth in academic research and longitudinal and comparative analysis. Scholars can explore textures and granularities in mobile communication patterns across a spectrum that is unmatched by other geographical regions.

Yet, much of available research has focused upon the four dominant markets we have noted above. So the first issue to consider is selective coverage: There have been a number of other Asian countries that have figured significantly in scholarship to date—the pioneering work of Philippine scholars comes to mind, for instance (Pertierra et al., 2002)—however many countries have been poorly studied, if at all. Even as the study of media and communications in Asia is intensifying, with tertiary-level programmes
being offered and students enrolled at unprecedented levels (Cheung, 2009), and research on Asia pre-

sented at international conferences and published in international journals are on the rise, many Asian
countries have relatively underdeveloped, unresourced universities, with poor infrastructure and con-

nectivity, and insufficient opportunities for researcher development and strong doctoral formation. This
issue of the geopolitics of universities, educational institutions, and research capacity is undeniably a
difficult one that can only be resolved with more concerted efforts at academic collaboration, sustained
mentorship and resource sharing. A great deal remains to be explored with regard to mobile communi-

cation in Asia, particularly in the realms of government, commerce, development, health and education,
so as to chart the implications of mobile communication for engagement, (dis)empowerment, sociality
and identity.

Secondly, there is “the elephant in the room” of the Anglophone bias of communication research.
A good deal of research on Asian mobiles is published in Asian languages — so how are these to be
translated (in all senses), engaged with, and acknowledged as part of international research? It cannot
solely be through the narrow and often uncomprehending filter of English-language communication
journals.

Thirdly, in general, scholarship on mobile communication is eminently international, yet arguably
still has a way to go before it can be regarded as genuinely cosmopolitan — not just in becoming com-
prehensive in its research objects and locales, but especially in its fundamental conceptual and theoretical
underpinnings. This need for communication scholarship to be genuinely international before it can
claim adequacy has been raised from various quarters (Law, Fortunati, & Yang, 2006; Goggin, & McLel-
land, 2006; Katz, 2008), but specifically was the subject of the 2005 Mobile Communication and Asian
Modernities conference convened by Angel Lin of City University of Hong Kong, in conjunction with
Beijing University.

It is this problematic of mobile communication in Asia, just outlined, that was the inspiration for
this themed section. The four papers showcased here form part of a larger set of papers on this topic.
The genesis for this scholarly colloquy and exchange was the research workshop entitled From SMS
to Smartphones: Tracing the Impact and Developmental Trajectory of the Mobile Phone in Asia that we
convened at the National University of Singapore on 13 – 14 February 2012. We thank all the participants
of this workshop, as well as others who responded to the call for papers for this special section — and
look forward to future opportunities to bring out a comprehensive account of this topic. In lieu of this,
the four fine papers collected here provide a gauge for the perspectives, concepts, approaches, and issues
that the Asian reorientation of mobile mediated communication entails.

References


Cortada, J. (2012). The digital flood: The diffusion of information technology across the U.S., Europe, and


