**Digital development imaginaries, informal business practices and the platformisation of digital technology in Zambia**

*Wendy Willems*

Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom

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**Abstract:**

Digital technology is not only treated as a crucial growth sector but is also seen as a means to transform business. Drawing on research with market vendors in Lusaka, Zambia, this chapter argues that trust and social capital remain crucial in informal business practices and are essential preconditions to the potential scaling up of business networks enabled by social media. Furthermore, it is crucial to analytically situate the role of digital technology in Africa within the wider context of the ‘platformisation’ of the internet which violates net neutrality and raises concerns about Africa’s growing datafication and threats to privacy.

**Keywords:**

digital development; social media; informal economy; economic change; platformisation; Zambia

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While Zambia was declared a middle-income country by the World Bank in 2011, the country’s economic performance has slowed down in recent years, exacerbated by the low copper price (caused by decreasing demand from China) and frequent electricity cuts. Coinciding with these changes, hopes are being vested in the ability of digital technology to contribute to economic growth. The Government of Zambia’s *Sixth National Development Plan, 2011-2015* (2011, p. 153) and the *Seventh National Development Plan, 2017-2021* (2017, p. 75) both identify information and communications technology as crucial in the country’s socio-economic development, and consider the improvement of ICT infrastructure as a key policy priority. This echoes a wider belief in the ability of digital technology to transform economies in the Global South, as reiterated for example by the World Bank’s 2016 World Development Report *Digital Dividends* and by scholars in the subfields of ICT4D, Mobile for Development (M4D) or Social Media for Development (SM4D). Tech hubs and start-ups are considered key to promoting innovation, investment and wider economic growth on the African continent, reflected by terms such as Kenya’s ‘Silicon Savannah’, Nigeria’s ‘Silicon Lagoon’ and Cameroon’s ‘Silicon Mountain’. Similarly, Zambia’s capital Lusaka has in recent years seen a growth in start-up initiatives, network events and ICT hubs, which have received increasing government support. For example, the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Authority (ZICTA) intends to launch a programme aimed at “unlocking the potential of ICT-related innovators, entrepreneurs, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and start-ups in contributing to the growth and development of the ICT sector” (ZICTA, 2015, p 2).

Digital technology is not only treated as a crucial growth sector in its own right but is also seen as a means to transform existing businesses, entrepreneurs and economic practices (Obijiofor, 2009; Aker and Mbiti, 2010; Porter, 2012; World Bank, 2016). Mobile phones are considered to be vital in the business practices of farmers, small-scale traders and market vendors. For some, they have enabled small businesses to communicate more effectively with customers or suppliers or made it possible for farmers to access market price information on livestock or agricultural commodities. However, in focusing attention on the contribution of digital technology to economic change, scholars ― and particularly those associated with the ICT4D field ― often fail to examine the way in which the internet itself is changing, slowly giving way to a space that is largely controlled by global social media platforms and marginalising local technology firms in the process. Hence, it is crucial to analytically situate digital media practices within the wider context of the growing ‘platformisation’ of the global mobile internet which does not only violate net neutrality but also raises concerns about the growing datafication of the Global South and threats to privacy (Helmond, 2015; Taylor and Broeders, 2015; Sambuli, 2016).

Against this background of global power relations which increasingly shape the nature of the internet, this chapter examines how informal traders and vendors in New Soweto Market in Lusaka, Zambia make use of digital technology in their working lives and the extent to which smartphones have transformed their business practices. Informal employment constitutes a substantial part of the labour force in Zambia, with a small minority of people employed in formal jobs (primarily in the mines in the northern part of the country and in the public sector). Only 28 per cent of those employed in Lusaka in 2014 held formal employment, and the majority (72 per cent) had informal jobs.[[1]](#endnote-1) Drawing on semi-structured interviews with informal traders and vendors, the chapter argues that smartphones, mobile internet and social media offer a number of opportunities to small-scale informal businesses, such as the ability to efficiently communicate with customers, to cheaply and instantly share information (e.g. images of goods) with traders in neighbouring countries, or to quickly transfer money to suppliers. However, technology does not radically transform informal businesses as face-to-face contact as well as building trust remain important preconditions for the scaling up of informal business networks. Furthermore, the growing ‘platformisation’ of Zambia’s mobile internet marginalises local technology firms, is likely to reinforce user dependency on global corporate platforms and poses risks to traders’ and vendors’ privacy.

The first section of this chapter examines the way in which policy documents, media discourses and academic accounts have imagined the role of digital technology in economic development. This is followed by a discussion of four critical approaches to digital development imaginaries: 1) technological solutionism; 2) technological determinism; 3) dependency between Global North and South; and 4) ethical concerns around data extraction. The third and fourth sections offer background and context on digital technology, economic development and informal trading in Zambia. The final section discusses how informal traders and vendors in New Soweto Market in Lusaka, Zambia make use of digital technology in their working lives and examines the extent to which smartphones have transformed their business practices

**Digital imaginaries and economic development**

A social imaginary refers to a “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). Contemporary social imaginaries on economic development often revolve around digital technology. Government policy documents, reports of international financial institutions, news articles and academic research are all involved in ‘doing’ this imagining. In the process, they construct narratives and discourses about the way in which digital technology transforms the economy. Hence, development imaginaries are increasingly also digital imaginaries which participate in reflecting on how digital tools and technologies such as mobile phones, mobile internet and social media platforms can potentially contribute to economic development. This is demonstrated by the following two quotations from a November 2017 article in *The Economist*:

As mobile phones spread, they speed economic growth and help boost productivity. Fast cable internet may be even better at creating well-paid jobs, boosting the number of startups and stimulating exports. Although data are still scarce, there is every reason to think that phones, the internet and the technologies that they enable may together provide Africa with the most powerful tools yet to alleviate poverty, boost growth and ultimately catch up with the rich world.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Similarly, the World Bank’s *Digital Dividends* report highlights that the internet has lowered the costs of “acquiring and using information, which in turn has lowered transaction costs—and often as a consequence, production costs” (World Bank, 2016, p. 42). According to the report, digital technology has created new markets for small producers and has made transactions faster and cheaper, thereby increasing economic productivity. This report is no exception and similarly optimistic narratives can be found in other policy documents and reports on the role of information and communication technologies on the African continent which often “propose Grand Visions of connectivity, attributing a self-evident positive, widespread, and transformational impact to the Internet” (Friederici, Ojanperä and Graham, 2017, p. 1).

In examining the impact of technology on economic development, academic accounts often make a distinction between benefits at the macro-economic or micro-economic level. At the level of nations, digital technology is considered to contribute to development “by improving communication, opening new investment opportunities, incorporating the African diaspora in development, and integrating the continent into the global economy” (Otiso and Moseley, 2009, p. 99). Hopes are vested in the ability of technology to promote economic growth, and for some, “there is a strong link between uptake of new technologies and the socioeconomic growth and development of different countries and communities” (Obijiofor, 2009, p. 32). At the level of individuals and households, the focus is frequently on the economic benefits of mobile phones, whose rapid growth on the African continent has been described as a ‘revolution’ (Etzo and Collender, 2010). For some, there is evidence that mobile phones “can enable the poor to build livelihood assets and take up employment opportunities, not only through direct employment or job-search benefits, but also through the critical support they can bring to small businesses in terms of expanded profit margins” (Porter, 2012, p. 253). Studies often focus on the way in which micro-enterprises, market traders, street vendors or small-scale farmers have managed to reduce their communication costs and facilitated their search for information through mobile phones, which ultimately is also considered to translate into growth and benefits at the macro-economic level (Aker and Mbiti, 2010).

Mobile phones have been central in digital imaginaries of economic development. For example, basic phones were assumed to enable small-scale enterprises and farmers to improve the efficiency of their communication with both customers and suppliers, to assist them in accessing market prices of key commodities via short-message service market information systems, and to carry out money transfers through for example M-Pesa. With the emergence of smartphones, mobile technology gained additional functionalities, including the capacity to access the internet. As compared to fixed line internet access, mobile internet required “fewer ICT skills, less financial resources and does not rely on electricity at home, compared to computers or laptops” (Stork, Galandro and Gillwald, 2013, p. 34). Because of the relatively low costs of smartphones, the mobile internet is considered to have the potential to close the digital divide. The emergence of the mobile internet has coincided with the rise of social media, which are increasingly dominating smartphone use and for many users equal to their experience of the internet. In the context of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, social media were considered crucial in mobilising resistance and democratising authoritarian contexts. Following the protests, a number of development agencies similarly began to put their faith in the ability of social media to provoke social change and to promote good governance by providing aid packages to digital activists (Christensen, 2011). However, apart from vesting hope in the political transformation that social media could bring about, the development sector is also increasingly recognising the potential of social media in economic development. For example, several reports and handbooks emphasise the opportunities offered by social media in agricultural development, enabling farmers to extend their networks and market their products more effectively (Andres and Woodard, 2013; Pedrick, 2015).

The focus on technology in contemporary development policy, discourses and practices is inextricably linked to the idea that business and entrepreneurship are key to Africa’s development and to ‘bottom-of-the pyramid’ (BOP) approaches which are gaining ground on the continent. These approaches encourage large multinational corporations to take advantage of the vast, underserved potential consumer base represented by ‘the global poor’ (Prahalad, 2004). Instead of treating them as victims in need of development aid, ‘the bottom-of-the-pyramid’ argument considers the poor as a crucial, profitable market. Furthermore, connecting the poor with multi-national corporations (MNCs) via the internet is expected to enable them to develop business opportunities. As Dolan and Rajak (2016, p. 515) argue, “[f]rom national governments to international financial institutions, donor agencies and NGOs, from big business to start-ups, diverse actors with varying interests are rallying behind the potential of BoP enterprise to discipline, and at the same time unleash, a new generation of African microentrepreneurs”.

For example, under the developmental banner of ‘connecting the unconnected’, corporate social media platforms such as Facebook have increasingly shifted their attention to emerging economies in the Global South in the face of saturating Global North markets. Since 2009, Facebook has developed a number of products and projects to target mobile internet users in low-income or low-bandwidth contexts such as Facebook Lite, Facebook Zero, Internet.org and Free Basics (Goggin, 2014, p. 1071-1072). By July 2017, Facebook’s Free Basics app had been launched in 24 African countries. The app enables mobile phone users to access a text-based version of Facebook free of charge while Facebook Lite allows users to run the application with less consumption of mobile data.[[3]](#endnote-3) These strategies have enabled Facebook to increase the number of African users to 170 million in 2017, representing significant growth of 42 percent since 2015.[[4]](#endnote-4)

**Critical approaches to digital development imaginaries**

Large social media corporations such as Facebook are thus increasingly part of an economic development paradigm that places technology at the heart of economic growth. However, critics have raised a number of concerns about the optimistic utopianism that is often part of these digital imaginaries on development (Kleine and Unwin, 2009; Murphy and Carmody, 2015; Friederici, Ojanperä and Graham, 2017). First of all, they could be seen to reproduce a form of ‘technological solutionism’ (Morozov, 2013). Echoing modernisation theory of the 1950s and 1960s, economic development here continues to be framed as a problem that can be solved with technology, thereby ignoring or neglecting other key structural inequalities between Global North and South. For example, the focus on the role of ICTs in economic development can “distort development priorities away from core issues like debt and poverty alleviation towards the pursuit of a ‘virtual panacea’ for Africa’s deep-rooted problems” (Alden 2003: 457), or it can present “the mobile phone as a technical fix for what are primarily problems of power maldistribution” (Carmody, 2012, p. 1).

Secondly, utopian digital imaginaries convey a sense of technological determinism which presupposes that technology has the potential to transform economic practices and “accords no importance to existing social conditions, assuming that equipping people with computers will suffice to leapfrog them into the technological world of economic opportunities” (Alzouma, 2005, p. 228). Technology is not always used in the way it is intended by those designing it, and its use is strongly shaped by a range of social factors, including class, gender, race, ethnicity, age etc, as social constructivists have reminded us (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987). Some scholars have emphasised the ‘othering’ of Global South digital media users in ICT4D discourses, who are often presented as using digital media purely for instrumental or utilitarian purposes, while much of their digital media use is in fact leisure-oriented (Arora, 2012; Arora and Rangaswamy, 2014).

A third critique reiterates the structuralist position of 1970s dependency theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein, who argued that the transfer of technology from the Global North to the Global South perpetuates dependencies and hampers the advancement of home-grown technology in developing countries. For example, Murphy et al (2014, p. 264) have argued that “ICTs are enabling new forms of outside intervention and intermediation into African markets, often further marginalising local firms and industries”. They contend that information and communication technologies on the continent are primarily used for the purpose of communication rather than more intensive uses such as information processing and management. This is echoed by Carmody (2013, p. 24) who points out that, “[w]hile Africa may be an information society, it is not, as yet, developing a knowledge economy. Mobile phone usage then represents a form of thin, rather than thick, integration (‘thintegration’) in the global economy, which, because it does not lead to high value-added exports, does not fundamentally alter the continent’s dependent position”. Hence, the advent of information and communication technologies on the continent has not transformed Africa’s position within the larger global economy in any significant way but instead, the adoption of digital technology continues to reinforce dependency and global inequalities. For others, the prevalence of mobile-only or mobile-centric internet access has produced an emerging underclass as compared to fixed internet access. The mobile Internet “offers lower levels of functionality and content availability; operates on less open and flexible platforms; and contributes to diminished levels of user engagement, content creation, and information seeking” (Napoli and Obar 2014, p. 323). Similarly, Donner (2015) points to the limitations of smartphones, arguing that these do not offer users the same opportunities as desktop computers.

Finally, for some, the expansion and growing power of global social media corporations in the Global South raises fundamental ethical concerns. Through the selling of adverts and (extracted) personal data to third parties, social media corporations have transformed themselves into highly profitable enterprises. Data are increasingly seen as “the fuel of the future”[[5]](#endnote-5) or “the world’s most valuable resource”[[6]](#endnote-6). Ekbia and Nardi (2017) use the term ‘heteromation’ to refer to the “the extraction of economic value from low-cost or free labor in computer-mediated networks”, and argue that data are essential to contemporary processes of capital accumulation. The expansion and growing power of global social media corporations in the Global South has to a large extent been made possible by the more relaxed privacy, corporate and investment regulation in the Global South as compared to the Global North, which leaves them freer to go about their business. Furthermore, the highly invisible nature of data mining and general lack of consumer awareness on the process further facilitates the expansion of these corporations.

Utopian debates on the role of ICT in economic development often emphasise how digital technology is changing business practices. However, in that way, they have failed to take into account how the internet itself is changing. Particularly in the context of Global South countries, internet access and use are increasingly shaped by global social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. For Helmond (2015, p. 1), this has resulted in the ‘platformisation’ of the internet, which refers to “the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and its consequences”. The growing level of control wielded by powerful global platforms reduces opportunities for local software developers to grow and contribute to the economy, while the extraction of personal data raises concerns about the datafication of the Global South and threats to privacy (Taylor and Broeders, 2015). Furthermore, the subsidisation or zero-rating of social media data violates (mobile) net neutrality (Sambuli, 2016). Ultimately, this provokes critical questions about the role of digital technology in development and change. It problematises the frequently assumed liberating and empowering aspects of digital technology and reveals the way in which it is caught up in older, unequal North-South relations of unfair competition, exploitation and extraction.

Some anthropologists have advocated for studying social media primarily through the lens of user practices. They have focused their analysis on “what people post and communicate through platforms, […] why we post and the consequences of those postings” (Miller et al, 2016, p. 1). They have argued that “[a]lthough social media platforms are themselves owned by private companies, social media does not necessarily favour the interests of commerce” (Miller, 2016, p. xiii). This section has avoided uncritically celebrating the agency of users of technology but instead highlighted the importance of analytically situating digital media practices within the constraints imposed by the growing power of global social media platforms. The next section examines the changing nature of digital media in Zambia against the background of recent economic developments.

**Digital technology and economic development in Zambia**

In 2015, the Zambian kwacha lost 51 per cent of its value against the US dollar which resulted in accelerating inflation rates and higher prices of imported goods.[[7]](#endnote-7) The country’s economic performance suffered further from a reduced demand for copper from China which lowered the price of copper. Subsequently, the mining industry experienced a slowdown which provoked a number of job losses. Against the background of this economic slump, the Government of Zambia vested hope in the ability of digital technology to contribute to economic growth, as reflected in its last two development plans which attributed an important role to digital technology (Government of Zambia, 2011, p. 153; Government of Zambia, 2017, p. 75). However, as compared to other African economies, such as Kenya which has increasing profiled itself as ‘digital Kenya’ spearheading a number of ICT innovations on the continent (Ndemo and Weiss, 2017), digital technologies in Zambia are more likely to be treated as means towards other ends instead of as a growth sector on its own.

Agriculture and mining continue to be imagined as the most crucial economic sectors. In terms of employment, most Zambians earn a living through self-employment in the informal economy. Since the implementation of economic deregulation and structural adjustment policies in the 1990s, formal employment has shrunk, and many Zambians in urban areas engage in street trading or market vending to sustain themselves. The increased number of street vendors has put growing pressure on urban space, with frequent attempts by local government to ‘clean up’ the streets and evict street traders or to confine them into so-called ‘modern markets’ (Hansen, 2008). Hence, small-scale entrepreneurship has become a dominant way of life for many urban residents of Lusaka, who are increasingly seen as entrepreneurial selves responsible for their own welfare, concomitant with neoliberal ideas on subjectivity and citizenship (Freeman, 2014).

Economic liberalisation did not only result into a growing informalisation and casualisation of employment and a substantive class of self-employed traders and vendors but also enabled the deregulation of economic sectors, including telecommunications. Since the 1990s, a number of privately-owned mobile phone networks have been allowed to operate in Zambia, and mobile phones have become widely available in the last decade. While in 2000, just under 99,000 Zambians had access to a mobile phone (equal to less than one percent of the population), this had spectacularly grown to a total of 12 million active mobile phone subscribers in 2016, which translates to 79.4 per cent of the population.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, smartphones have recently contributed to an increase in internet access, which is now largely accessed via mobile devices. In 2016, 5.2 million people were using mobile broadband, equal to 32.2 per cent of the population.[[9]](#endnote-9) While network access has improved and the costs of mobile devices (including smartphones) have decreased in the last decade, it seems probable that urban, middle-class residents are more likely to use mobile internet services than less well-off, rural residents, although survey data are currently lacking to substantiate this further. However, the costs of mobile internet access have been reduced in recent years, and this has made the service more accessible to younger, less well-off users.

The growth in mobile internet use has to a large extent been driven by social media, enabled by subsidised access to platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp via ‘data bundles’ or ‘social bundles’, which are provided by most Zambian mobile phone operators. For example, Airtel offers combined bundles of voice, data and SMS messages.[[10]](#endnote-10) For ZMW1.5 (£0.11), customers receive 6 minutes and 500 SMS messages per day; for ZMW3 (£0.23), customers receive 12 minutes, 20MB data and 1,000 SMS messages per day; and for ZMW5 (£0.38), customers receive 21 minutes, 20MB data and 1,000 SMS messages. MTN Zambia, which is often credited with higher mobile internet speeds, offers a daily bundle of 20MB data and free WhatsApp for ZMW3.15 (£0.24).[[11]](#endnote-11) The prevalence of ‘social bundles’ has made mobile internet access increasingly affordable but it also means that for many Zambians, the internet increasingly equals social media, pointing to the growing ‘platformisation’ of the Zambian web. In the last few years, the number of Facebook subscribers has grown from an estimated 117,520 users in 2011 to 1.4 million users in 2016, which is equal to 9 per cent of the population.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Hence, while previously, access to the internet was largely via desktop computers in public spaces such as internet cafes or libraries during specified office hours, the growing availability of mobile internet access has made possible on-the-go internet access *anywhere, anytime* ― whether on public transport or at home. This has not only decoupled internet access from physical travel as browsing the web no longer requires one to move, it has also made available the internet at any point of the day, unconstrained by the opening hours of public access points. Furthermore, it has reduced the urban spatial divide in internet access. For example, in Lusaka, internet cafes were more likely to be available in formal, busy shopping areas such as around Cairo Road or in upmarket shopping malls such as Arcades rather than in informal market areas such as Soweto Market which lacked security. However, smartphones have now made access possible in areas which previously did not have public access points. In the following section, I discuss how market vendors based in New Soweto Market, which is part of the larger Soweto Market at the edge of Lusaka’s city centre, have appropriated these new forms of technology.

**New Soweto Market, informal trading and uses of mobile digital technology**

New Soweto Market was constructed in the mid-2000s as part of the Urban Markets Development Programme, which was funded by the European Union and sought to construct eleven ‘modern markets’ in different parts of Zambia. The market is surrounded by a gate, which separates it from the remainder of Soweto Market. It has an estimated 3,000 stalls[[13]](#endnote-13) and hosts a range of vendors ― old and young, male and female, low-income and relatively well-off ―, trading in food, clothes, fabrics, homeware, electronic equipment, mobile phones, phone accessories and credit. The market has designated, small lock-up shops for high-value goods such as clothes, electronics or agricultural implements; larger warehouse-style shops for agricultural commodities such as grains; larger spaces for restaurants; and covered rows of shared, long table-style displays for the selling of vegetables and dried fish. Apart from the formal structures of the market, vendors have also erected their own structures within the market such as covered stalls (made of wood and fabric), container shops, or they simply display their goods on the ground on the outer edges of the walkways inside the market.

As part of my fieldwork in this market in July-August 2016, I spent time in New Soweto Market chatting to vendors about their work, getting to know a range of different businesses and observing both business practices and uses of digital technology. I interviewed a total of thirty-seven market vendors (twenty-three male and fourteen female), mostly through individual interviews and via a small number of focus groups. Interviewees broadly represented the wide range of vendors described above. They included vendors trading basic food items such as grains, beans and dried fish; traders selling wholesale agricultural supplies and pesticides; stall holders offering clothes, curtains, second-hand shoes and fabrics; shop owners providing new clothes or electronic goods like digital music, memory cards, mobile phones and phone accessories; as well as restaurant employees and security guards.

At the time of my research, there was a general perception that trading opportunities had deteriorated because of higher inflation and the general slowdown of the economy. As a female restaurant employee shared: “[i]t has become difficult to earn money. Business is hard and money is scarce […]. It was better the way it was back then but now it has become harder. Everything is now expensive and money is even harder to find”.[[14]](#endnote-14) Traders used a range of phones, from branded Samsung or Huawei smartphones to low-cost imported internet-enabled phones from China. Most had dual- or triple-SIM phones which allowed vendors to use SIM-cards from different mobile phone networks such as Airtel or MTN. This enabled them to take advantage of attractive special offers on ‘talk time’ or mobile data, or to benefit from the good coverage of a particular network in a certain area. Those vendors who owned a smartphone tended to be younger, or relatively educated, or were trading in higher-value goods (e.g. new clothes or electronic goods). Interviewees described more expensive, branded smartphones as ‘original phones’ (common brands included Samsung, Huawei, LG or Nokia) and low-cost smartphones as ‘Chinese phones’ (common brands included TECNO, KGTel and ZTE), which typically had a lower battery life.

The focus in this chapter is on business uses of mobile and social media. This is not to suggest that vendors primarily or exclusively use their phone for their businesses. As other scholars have pointed out, digital media use in the Global South is not strictly motivated by instrumental or utilitarian reasons but is in fact often driven by leisure and play (Arora, 2012; Arora and Rangaswamy, 2014). However, my main interest in this chapter is to gain an understanding of the role of digital technology in economic life. While most interviewees used mobile call or SMS services in their trading practices, not all could see the relevance of mobile internet or social media in their business. Some perceived social media as primarily suitable for private communication and less appropriate for business communication. As a female soft drink seller intimated, “Social media? Ah, it doesn’t help. Because you get to, right here we just get to chat like, ‘Hey, how are you?’, ‘How was your day?’, ‘How is your family?’. Things like that. Not really for business”.[[15]](#endnote-15) Others associated the (mobile) internet or SMS with a more well-off, well-educated and younger group of users. A middle-aged wholesale trader put it as follows:

[I]f you want to go on the internet you need to be educated, like you must have at least an idea. Because you can’t even do business where even I haven’t done it if I can say […]. Most of us are used to doing business hand-to-mouth. So if you think of going to a café you may feel that you are wasting a lot of time […]. Because within our class, we mainly use calling. Just buy talk time and call someone. We don’t mainly depend on messages and internet. So, it’s calling, you see, but we do know that it’s more expensive than using a message, or going on the net which is cheaper. We know that. We know that.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Older, middle-aged traders, low-income vendors, or those with little education attributed less importance to smartphones as compared to younger, relatively educated, or better-off traders for whom the smartphone opened up a number of opportunities, including communicating with suppliers or customers, browsing social media, listening to music or playing games. This was a welcome distraction during the ample time spent waiting for business in the market.

Apart from lack of digital literacy, other constraints in using smartphones during the period of research included the frequent electricity cuts (particularly common in 2016 due to serious shortages at the time) which hampered effective phone use. Interviewees indicated that smartphones required more frequent charging than older basic phone models, and this was challenging during a time when electricity supply in New Soweto Market was rather erratic, or because not all vendors had access to electricity from their stall or workplace. Traders deployed a number of strategies to overcome these limitations. Some used an older phone model for basic communication such as calling and SMS messages in combination with a smartphone for internet browsing and social media use. Those vendors not intensively making use of mobile internet (and therefore not quickly draining battery life) would just use a smartphone only, and those not using the mobile internet at all for various reasons would merely use a basic phone. In response to lower electricity supply (as a result of frequent power cuts in 2016) and higher electricity demand (because of higher smartphone use which required more frequent charging), innovative traders with access to mains electricity or generators (during power cuts) offered mobile phone charging services to fellow vendors or customers against a small payment.

**Mobile digital technology, economic practices and business networks**

For most vendors, digital technology offered a range of opportunities for use in their businesses, i.e. to communicate easily and cheaply with existing customers and suppliers both within and outside Zambia; to strengthen existing and to develop new business networks; to coordinate management of the business; to entertain during quiet hours through listening to music or religious sermons; to easily transfer money to suppliers or receive money from customers; or to calculate invoices.

As several scholars have argued, the mobile phone is often primarily used to strengthen existing ‘strong ties’ with family and friends (Ling and Campbell, 2011, p. 8). However, it can also be a tool “to build a network of strong and weak ties that potentially could be called upon in the future” (Wallis, 2011, p. 72). Vendors in New Soweto Market confirmed that the mobile phone was indispensable in communicating with existing customers and suppliers. Informal businesses often strongly rely on personal networks, and the mobile phone was perceived as an important tool in cultivating these and maintaining social networks more efficiently. Having access to a mobile phone enabled traders to inform their customers when certain products were in stock, as pointed out by a second-hand clothes seller: “When I am ordering new stock, I call the customers and tell them. They will come and buy”.[[17]](#endnote-17) If customers are not forthcoming or fail to visit, traders report to use mobile phones to chase them: “[clients] usually call me notifying when they will come next and sometimes I usually call them telling them that they are taking long”.[[18]](#endnote-18) Social media networks such as Facebook enable traders to bring customers together within an online space that can potentially be used to market their stock or cultivate customers. For example, as a young male seller of agricultural supplies suggested, “[i]f your customer has already given you their name, you could say maybe Wisdom. Then you can go to Facebook and find that person through Facebook. If you find that one, maybe they can accept it or not (friend request). So if they accept, you can start chatting with them”.[[19]](#endnote-19) Conversely, it has allowed customers to double-check on the availability of certain items, thereby potentially avoiding costly physical travel in case the goods were not available.

Visual social media platforms such as WhatsApp facilitate communication further as they enable the exchange of images. Hence, traders can take images of certain goods and share these cheaply with customers because of their subsidised access to social media via data bundles. As a young female clothes seller told me: “I can capture pictures of things I am selling here. Then send them on WhatsApp and people who are interested would call me”.[[20]](#endnote-20) Vendors mostly used WhatsApp for the sharing of images with customers as compared to Facebook Messenger because WhatsApp’s interface was more user-friendly to carry out this task. If they wanted to share images with other users who were in close physical proximity, they would also use Bluetooth. Mobile phones have also made communication between traders and suppliers easier. Traders can check with suppliers whether they have certain items in stock, either by phone or by sharing an image of the item they would like to source via WhatsApp, or they can order goods without having to travel to their suppliers. This is particularly important because suppliers are highly mobile and travel frequently. Clothes, in particular, are often sourced by Zambian cross-border traders from South Africa and Tanzania. Because they tend to be on the move, the mobile phone has become an important tool that can literally ‘locate’ them: “[cross-border traders] usually move about so when they call you, you quickly go get the merchandise before they make another move”.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Mobile phones have enabled vendors to extend their customer base beyond the immediate vicinity of New Soweto Market and to maintain customer networks in other parts of the country. Assuming a certain level of trust is present between traders and customers, vendors mentioned to do business over the phone without the need to physically meet the customer: “Sometimes I receive calls from my customers to prepare for them some products. I am able to send trade items as far as Kasama. In such a case I usually send products by bus”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Relatedly, a male fish and grain seller reported to have customers located far from Lusaka: “Because we have got customers, maybe who stay in Copperbelt, Western Province, they will phone you: ‘Do you have this type of fish which I want? How much is the price?’. Then we can communicate. ‘Send me so many bags’”.[[23]](#endnote-23) Social media access via smartphones has further scaled up and facilitated international networks beyond Zambia. Both the low costs of contacting suppliers based abroad and the opportunity to exchange images of commodities via WhatsApp have enabled traders to easily do business with suppliers located abroad, as demonstrated in the following quote from a female curtain and clothes seller:

Like this time, I would like some supplies from South Africa so what I do these days is that I just take pics of the things I want from South Africa and then I send them on WhatsApp. Sometimes when I don’t want to travel, I just do the same and the suppliers in South Africa will send the items I want then I send the money […]. I do travel but when I don’t want to travel or when I have run out of stock very fast that’s when I normally send the pics on WhatsApp to South Africa and then those guys there would buy for me.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Purchasing stock from international suppliers or selling to international customers has also been enhanced by mobile money services that have increasingly been offered by a number of mobile network operators in Zambia. Mobile money transfers suit vendors because formal banks may not have a strong presence in informal markets, making it more time-consuming to access banking services and once again requiring more physical travel. For low-income vendors who may not have access to formal bank accounts, mobile money transfers still make it possible to effect electronic transactions. However, again, mobile money transactions strongly rely on mutual trust and existing strong ties between traders and suppliers.

So far, this section has summed up a number of ways in which the various uses of mobile phone technology have strengthened existing networks or enabled communication between customers and suppliers with a prior business relationship. However, a key distinguishing feature of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter is that they make it possible for strangers to meet and interact. While most appropriations of social media for business uses appear to reinforce existing networks, there are a few opportunities which traders in New Soweto Market highlighted that have enabled them to scale up and to take advantage of the opportunity to develop new business networks with strangers. In this regard, Facebook has been more frequently used than Twitter for two reasons. First of all, because of the platform’s specific affordances that lean themselves better to small businesses. While Twitter is associated with sharing commentary on political or other affairs, Facebook orients itself more to small businesses through its buy-and-sell groups.[[25]](#endnote-25) Secondly, at the time, Zambia had relatively low numbers of Twitter users given that Facebook was typically included in data bundles in and Twitter tended not to be, which made it rather pricey to access this particular platform.

Although some vendors reported to use their Facebook profile to market goods to their contacts, most referred to Zambian Facebook buy-and-sell groups such as ‘Amasampo mu Lusaka’ or ‘Ama Sampo’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Both groups are closed and bring together nearly 200,000 members. For some, this was a convenient way to sell an unwanted item or to source a particular commodity such as a mobile phone. As a young male curtain seller illustrated: “Maybe say, you want to sell your phone, you post it there then you sell it [..]. Maybe there is someone who has whatever you want. He can simply respond, then make communication, then you have your thing. You can be done without you worrying going around looking for something. You just post it”.[[27]](#endnote-27) However, others were uncomfortable with using online shopping platforms or Facebook groups as they feared becoming victim of a crime:

Though I fear there is a risk. I was thinking that maybe there is a risk. That’s why I have not used it. The internet thing when buying something that I want from outside the country. I was thinking that maybe there is cybercrime.[[28]](#endnote-28)

There are Amasampo groups. Those where, if you have a phone, you can just go there and say: “Ah, I have got this phone”. Then maybe you find that a person just stole that phone, then they bring it onto Facebook, selling it. Then you like it and you are like let me buy that phone. Then after you take it, you may find yourself in deep trouble. The police will start following you.[[29]](#endnote-29)

In many ways, online platforms such as buy-and-sell Facebook groups mirror the informality and lack of regulation of spaces such as New Soweto Market. The fact that they do not involve immediate face-to-face contact ensures that many Zambians do not trust them. Unlike ‘Amasampo mu Lusaka’, ‘Ama Sampo’ has made attempts to formalise their page and enhance trust and legitimacy.[[30]](#endnote-30) However, they do not take responsibility to protect any transactions and recommend their members to “NEVER send any random member money remotely, only do this with people you know and trust- otherwise consult with the administration of the group”. Hence, arguably, a more effective use of social media platforms for business purposes would depend ― among other factors ― on stronger forms of customer protection, currently offered by ecommerce platforms such as eBay.[[31]](#endnote-31)

There have been attempts in Zambia to formalise and develop local ecommerce platforms. For example, Dot Com Zambia launched a donor-funded project in May 2017 aimed at providing Zambian micro, small and medium enterprises with access to an online business platform, enabling them to access new markets locally and globally.[[32]](#endnote-32) It is uncertain at present whether these platforms will be able to compete with global social media platforms in the future, which may choose to invest in incorporating business features in their networks and platform architecture. While at present, Facebook Business and Facebook Marketplace address businesses as well as traders, there are indications that the platform envisages further engagement with the small and medium enterprise (SME) sector, including on the African continent.[[33]](#endnote-33) In October 2017, the company set up a SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) Council in Nigeria, which was the first one on the African continent. At the launch of the council, a Facebook representative reiterated that business was key to development on the continent. As he pointed out, “[s]mall businesses form the backbone of most of the thriving economies in the world, driving sustainable growth and creating jobs, and those in Nigeria are no different. Facebook is strategically positioned to help SMEs grow their businesses”.[[34]](#endnote-34)

These developments could potentially further reinforce the ‘platformisation’ of Zambia’s internet. As indicated earlier in this chapter, platformisation refers to the growing infrastructural and economic power of social media platforms on the internet (Helmond, 2015). In the Zambian context, internet access increasingly equals mobile access to social media as a result of data bundles which effectively subsidise users’ access to social media. The mobile internet experience of most of my interviewees was dominated by Facebook and WhatsApp given that these were the platforms part of data bundles and therefore much cheaper to access than regular websites, other platforms or search engines such as Google. When users leave Facebook, they receive a warning ‘You are about to leave Facebook. Standard data charges may apply’, thereby encouraging users to remain within the platform. The reliance of digital technology users on platforms has encouraged Zambian businesses to offer their services on these spaces rather than on regular websites (expensive for users to access), which has further reinforced platformisation. Ultimately, this challenges the principle of net neutrality which maintains that users should be able to access all areas of the internet equally without price discrimination or differentiation (Sambuli, 2016). The further concentration of power into a handful of platforms does not only raise concerns about net neutrality but also threatens users’ privacy. Personal data are continuously extracted in internet user experiences which are dominated by platforms (Taylors and Broeders, 2015).

While the zero-rating of Facebook via the introduction of Free Basics in India provoked resistance from activists linked to the #SaveTheInternet campaign (and ultimately led the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to block the initiative, see Mukerjee, 2016), there has been little critical debate in the Zambian context on zero- or subsidised rating of social media data. None of my interviewees raised concern about the way in which their mobile internet experience was shaped by social media platforms, and there has not been an extensive public debate on the issue to my knowledge. However, it is crucial to situate digital user practices within the wider constraints of global power relations so as to avoid an uncritical celebration of the potential role of technology – whether mobile phones, mobile internet or big data – in economic growth in the Global South. Clearly, technology is not always taken up as expected and the concentration of power in a handful of global social media platforms could in the future inhibit local actors from taking advantage of the economic opportunities offered by digital technology.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, it could be argued that key to the relevance, or ‘success’, of mobile digital technology to informal traders was the convergent nature of the smartphone, and its ability to combine a range of services in a portable, mobile, compact device. Smartphones bring together call and SMS services, internet access, social media use, MP3 playback, mobile money transfer options, and phone functions such as a calculator, camera and torch. Hence, those vendors who were able to afford and use smartphones (typically, younger, better-off and relatively educated users) could employ the phone to complete a number of different tasks in relation to their businesses. Furthermore, given that informal trading is associated with a high level of physical mobility on the part of traders, customers and suppliers, mobile phones have succeeded in speeding up and facilitating communication. Because vendors were able to do business ‘on the phone’, they had less of a need to visit suppliers, thereby minimising physical travel, reducing transport costs and saving time.

While much hope has been vested in the ability of digital technology to bring about economic growth and to enhance the livelihoods of farmers, small-scale traders and market vendors, this chapter has however highlighted a number of limitations which challenge these utopian assumptions. First, while the literature has celebrated the potential of commodity price information systems to make economic transactions more profitable and efficient, my research has emphasised the importance of trust and personal networks between traders and customers in the exchange of information on prices. Mobile phones tend to primarily facilitate communication between existing business networks during which information on prices is exchanged. Lack of trust in dealing with ‘anonymous’, unregulated business spaces such as Facebook buy-and-sell groups arguably hampers a ‘scaling-up’ of business networks.

Unlike informal traders and businesses, it could be argued that Zambia’s formal sector has more intensively exploited social media platforms to maintain customer relations and to market products. Many medium-sized businesses no longer use websites but instead rely on the infrastructure provided by corporate social media platforms. The technical affordances of Facebook’s platform provide small- to medium-sized businesses with a cheap and easy-to-manage digital interface which avoids the higher design, hosting and maintenance costs and skillset required to set up a formal website. Combined with the fact that most mobile internet users regularly visit social media platforms because of their subsidised nature, businesses tend to avoid setting up websites and limit their digital presence to Facebook pages.

Conventional studies on the role of digital media in economic life in the Global South often reproduce a simplistic causality between technology and economic growth and development. This chapter has advocated for a more nuanced and critical approach, acknowledging both the changes and continuities associated with the incorporation of technology by informal traders and vendors. Trust and social capital remain crucial in informal business practices, and are essential preconditions to the potential scaling up of business networks enabled by social media. Secondly, the chapter has argued that the strong focus on the role of digital technology in economic change in ICT4D discourses and digital development imaginaries has prevented us from fully appreciating the way in which technology itself is changing over time. Particularly in the context of Global South countries, internet access and use are increasingly shaped by global social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The ‘platformisation’ of the internet and the growing level of control wielded by these power players reduces opportunities for local software developers to grow and contribute to the economy, while the extraction of personal data raises concerns about the datafication of the Global South and threats to privacy. Finally, the subsidisation or zero-rating of social media data violates (mobile) net neutrality. Ultimately, this provokes critical questions about the role of digital technology in development and change. It problematises the frequently assumed liberating and empowering aspects of digital technology and demonstrates the importance of analytically situating user practices within older, unequal North-South power relations of unfair competition, exploitation and extraction.

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31. eBay currently does not operate a specific country website in Zambia, nor does it work with Zambian traders. Zambian consumers can however purchase goods from eBay and have these shipped to Zambia via services offered by shipping companies such as Import Zambia (<http://www.importzambia.com/services.html>). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. “Dot Com Zambia to Launch Global e-Commerce Platform for Zambian Companies”, 22 May 2017. Retrieved 9 April 2018 from http://www.techtrends.co.zm/dot-com-zambia-launch-global-e-commerce-platform-zambian-companies. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See https://www.facebook.com/business and https://www.facebook.com/marketplace. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Osuagwu, P. 2017. ‘Why Facebook Sited Africa’s First SME Council in Nigeria’, *Vanguard*, 8 November 2017. Retrieved 13 December 2017 from https://www.vanguardngr.com/2017/11/facebook-sited-africas-first-sme-council-nigeria. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)