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Dialling democracy: mobile phones and political participation in Ghana

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Following the extraordinary rise of mobile phone use in Ghana over the last decade, LSE alumnus Andrew Small examines its potential impact on democracy in the West African country.*

In November 2012, weeks before their country's general election, Ghanaians began to receive text messages from a familiar, but unexpected name.

"My Dear Friend", one read. "[Our] Govt has distributed over 3 million school uniforms and 40 million exercise books to needy pupils in Ghana."

The bulk campaign messages were signed off by John Mahama, incumbent President of Ghana, whose party went on to win the election by a slim margin. And they were far from an anomaly. During Ghana's 2012 election campaign politicians, media outlets, election observers, non-governmental organisations and fundraisers all hopped on the mobile bandwagon, using the technology in their own way, to meet their own ends. Was this Africa's "[mobile revolution](#)" in action, or simply a continuation of established power structures, aided by new tools?



A polling station near Bolgatanga in Northern Ghana Credit: Eileen Delhl via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/1jYdGt2>) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

To place these questions in context, consider the extraordinary rise in mobile phone use Ghana has seen over the past decade. 83 per cent of adults in Ghana [now own a mobile phone](#), up from 8 per cent in 2002, and many people own more than one device. In the words of one Accra-based app developer, "almost everyone [in Ghana] has a mobile device. Even your grandmother sitting in a rural village." On the back of this surge in mobile phone use, a network of nine "[innovation hubs](#)" has sprung up across Ghana, where local developers produce mobile applications with diverse, sometimes overlapping aims: be they political, humanitarian or commercial.

Dialling democracy

Academics have made some lofty claims about the potential for mobile phones to jump-start democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Kwaku Opoku-Agyemang, whose research focuses on mobile phones and governance in Ghana, [asserts that](#) "mobile phones... are a powerful tool... they can actually force politicians to take responsibility for their actions." In a similarly enthusiastic vein, Johan Hellström [wrote in 2012](#) that "during the past ten years we have witnessed how mobile phones and the simple functions of voice and text messaging can empower citizens and affect the way citizens interact with each other and with society as a whole."

There is some data from Ghana to back up these claims. On the day of the 2012 election, a coalition of 4,000 independent election observers equipped with basic mobile phones reduced fraud at the stations where they were deployed by [about 60 per cent](#). Their method was simple: throughout the day, each observer sent coded SMS messages about voter conduct and vote tallies to an "observation centre" in the capital, which used the data to cross-check official vote counts. Another initiative, the

African Elections Project, allowed individuals to report cases of electoral violence via SMS, then plotted the incidents on an map on [their website](#).

It is not only on election day that mobile phones have had an impact on political and democratic participation in Ghana. Two popular radio shows in Accra – Joy FM's 'Feedback' and Peace FM's '*Wo haw ne sen*' – enable citizens to share their grievances or opinions on the air via text message or phone call. [A 2012 study](#) found that these shows are successful in resolving listener complaints in up to 60 per cent of cases. One civil society representative, citing the example of radio call-in shows, believes that "freedom of speech in Ghana is now at a different level because of mobile phones." Another initiative that aims to connect citizens to decision makers through their phones is the [SurveyLink](#) tool, developed by Kumasi-based VOTO Mobile, which offers governance surveys in four languages. VOTO Mobile then collates the results and channels them to news media and decision makers. While this tool has strong potential to give a voice to rural populations, its operation is limited by dependence on donor funds.

These successful projects have one thing in common: they are all tailored to Ghanaian styles of communication and creatively negotiate limitations in infrastructure and access. As Claudia Abreu Lopes and Sharath Srinivasan [have observed](#), such tools "build on local knowledge and habits and allow users to progressively shape and master innovation, rather than be forced into new programmes from above." This trend towards local mobile innovation is immensely significant, as it subverts the traditional 'communication for development' dynamic, which viewed technology as a foreign, modernising force to be introduced into African settings.

Traversing the last mile

For every mobile app with a positive impact on democracy in Ghana there are, inevitably, a number of well-intentioned flops. Often these failures result from a mismatch with local habits and circumstances. One example is a tool developed by the UNDP and the Electoral Commission of Ghana ahead of the 2012 election, which allowed citizens to verify their voter registration details by SMS. This was a good idea in theory, but the tool [attracted criticism](#) for failing to accommodate the 50 per cent of Ghanaians who use their phones for voice calls only. The 30 pesewa cost of sending a message to the service – a 1,500 per cent hike from regular SMS rates – also deterred people from participating. Many other mobile apps with the aim of expanding democratic participation have struggled to gain traction due to a reliance on data access, when only 14 per cent of Ghanaian adults presently own a smartphone.

In international development parlance, the "[last mile challenge](#)" refers to the barriers faced by isolated communities in accessing essential social goods and products. Mobile phones have the potential to traverse this last mile in Ghana, extending meaningful political participation to all, however significant limitations remain. On a functional level, Ghana's unreliable electricity infrastructure presents a major stumbling block, with [12 and 24-hour power cuts commonplace](#). Another crucial limitation is that most mobile phone initiatives with a civic goal rely exclusively on donor funds. Without self-sustainability, the existence of such projects is therefore contingent on international economic cycles and the whims of foreign benefactors.

A final concern expressed by political observers about the spread of mobile phones in Africa is the "double potential" for them to empower both citizens and the state. As Sokari Ekine [has noted](#) "there is no doubt that mobile and internet technology is democratising social change in communities across Africa... We must, however, also recognise that technology has the capacity to concentrate power and therefore could be used to reinforce existing power relations." In Ghana, this potential is manifest in the Government's stringent regulations on mobile phone licensing, interconnectivity, quality of service and spectrum allocation. These rules serve to entrench the Government's own position of power, in the process inhibiting the democratising capacity of mobile phones.

To revisit the question at the start of this piece, has the spread of mobile phones in Ghana radically reshaped the distribution of political power in the country – or simply reinforced the existing relationship between citizen and state? The answer, as you might expect, currently lies somewhere in the middle, however there is every reason to expect that as mobile phone uptake continues to rise in Ghana, the number of tools and apps aiming to hold the Government to account will multiply. If these tools build on local knowledge and habits in a bottom-up fashion, we may soon witness a genuine "mobile revolution" in the country, with networked governance structures replacing the unaccountable hierarchies of old.

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