Introduction

Robert J. Foster and Heather A. Horst

Digicel and the Mobile Revolution

Over the past decade, Pacific Islanders have witnessed remarkable growth in the presence and adoption of mobile telecommunications. For example, average mobile coverage (2G) in Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu jumped from less than half of the population in 2005 to 93 per cent of the population in 2014 (Pacific Region Infrastructure Facility 2015). A 2015 Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA) report notes that unique subscriptions across the entire region increased from 2.3 million in 2009 to 4.1 million at the end of 2014 – a 12.6 per cent annual growth rate. This 'mobile revolution' is one result of the liberalisation of the telecommunications sector that opened national markets to competition in the 1990s.

While at first liberalisation affected the provision of landlines and postal services, reforms in information and communication technology (ICT) policy and regulation, which were spearheaded by the World Bank, led to partnerships between global telecommunications companies, such as British-owned Cable and Wireless, and national carriers in the region. Eventually, the markets for mobile phone services were opened up. Vodafone entered the market in Fiji in 1994 and was the sole mobile telecommunications provider until 2008. In Papua New Guinea, however, the only operator until 2007 was state-owned Telikom PNG. Its subsidiary, Bemobile, had in 2006 only 100,000 mobile phone subscribers (Cave 2012: 5), most of whom were based in the capital, Port Moresby.[1]

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1   In 2013, the PNG Government acquired 85 per cent of the shares of Bemobile Limited. In 2014, Bemobile signed a non-equity partner market agreement with Vodafone Group Plc., the world's largest mobile operator. The new entity operates in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands as bmobile-vodafone.

Elsewhere, Telecom Vanuatu focused on delivering mobile services on the main island of Efate and in the capital of Port Vila until a new carrier, Digicel, entered the market in 2008.

For many in the Pacific, the story of the mobile revolution begins with the arrival of Digicel Group Limited (Digicel). Digicel started operations in Jamaica in 2001 and expanded throughout the Caribbean and Central America over the next five years (Horst and Miller 2006). Founded by Irish businessman Denis O'Brien, the nimble mobile network provider is privately owned – 94 per cent by O'Brien himself – and registered in Bermuda with headquarters in Kingston, Jamaica. Digicel's global mobile subscriber base has grown from 400,000 in 2002 to 13.6 million across more than 30 countries (Digicel n.d.).

Strategically, Digicel targeted 'high risk' countries with fairly small populations in the developing world. They introduced aggressive competition into markets where telecommunications services were provided, often ineffectively, by state-sponsored monopolies. Digicel's interest in the Pacific Islands officially began with the award of a licence to operate in Samoa in 2006 and, soon afterwards, in Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Nauru. Digicel also attempted to obtain a licence in the Solomon Islands in 2007, but was blocked following a local effort to protect the state-owned incumbent, Solomon Telekom. After subsequent attempts to acquire a licence in 2008 and 2009, Digicel lost its bid to Bemobile.[2] (The company is not present in New Caledonia, which has a well-developed telecommunications infrastructure maintained by one mobile phone and 3G broadband carrier, OPT Telecom.)

In Nauru, a tiny island republic with 10,000 citizens, Digicel now claims 100 per cent of the mobile market (Digicel Group Limited 2015). Papua New Guinea is by far the company's largest and most lucrative Pacific market where Digicel has at various points held up to 97 per cent of mobile market share (Digicel Group Limited 2015). Vanuatu has approximately 180,000 connections for a population of 261,000 (GSMA 2015) and Digicel claims 69 per cent of its mobile market (Digicel Group Limited 2015). Somewhat surprisingly, given the relative economic health of the country, Fiji – where Digicel holds approximately 33 per cent market share (Digicel Group Limited 2015; the actual rate might be as low as 20

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2   For maps of Digicel's markets in the Caribbean, Central America and the Pacific, see the company's website: www.digicelgroup.com

per cent) – remains one of its least successful operations. Vodafone Fiji continues to dominate the market due to its historical relationship with Fijian state agents and agencies as well as the goodwill associated with the company's philanthropic foundation. The country's skilled workforce and relatively comfortable standard of living have, however, made Fiji an ideal choice for the location of Digicel Pacific's regional headquarters, which are situated in downtown Suva. Overall, the Pacific region still has one of the lowest rates of penetration for mobile subscriptions in the world, including in its largest global market – Papua New Guinea – where subscriber rates linger around 41 per cent (Digicel 2015; other estimates put the rate at as low as 31 per cent [GSMA 2015]). Nevertheless, the perception of untapped market potential and future growth in mobile phone adoption motivates Digicel's continued investments in the region.

Across the six Pacific countries in which Digicel operates, there have been significant costs associated with investing in mobile markets. These costs involve negotiating with national land trust boards and customary landowners to place towers in the most effective locations for signal transmission; installing towers in remote regions, access to which often requires lengthy boat rides or the use of helicopters followed by a long hike for technicians carrying the parts to be assembled; and establishing a retail network of vendors to sell and distribute handsets, subscriber identity module (SIM) cards and prepaid airtime.

During the first five years of operations, Digicel managed to build goodwill and enjoy popularity among consumers in the region. The introduction of competition reduced the price of calls and the availability and accessibility of handsets. The establishment of mobile networks in poorly served regions enabled Digicel to reach more marginalised segments of the population by building a consumer base of low-income and rural communities. The company's self-proclaimed 'bigger and better network' allowed for stronger connections between family and friends in remote villages and the growing urban centres across Melanesia. Digicel also engaged in well-publicised acts of corporate philanthropy, such as providing aid after cyclones and contributing to education, youth, community and health initiatives. They established the Digicel Foundation in Papua New Guinea in 2008 and invested in the 'cultural' dimensions of their new consumer markets by sponsoring rugby and other popular sports teams as well as music competitions.

This initial goodwill, however, is increasingly contested as Digicel attempts to maintain its competitive edge and to reach out to new consumers while still dealing with the constraints of physical geography that have shaped mobile networks throughout the region. In many remote areas, 2G networks and the use of satellites limit the network speed and access available to consumers, who largely use prepaid voice and short message services (SMS). In urban areas, an increase in smartphones and the growing appetite for social media have spurred demand for faster speeds (4G and long-term evolution [LTE]) and provision of data services and bundles, such as day passes and free access to Facebook.

Digicel has embraced digital media convergence, evolving into a provider of content as well as connectivity. The company has diversified into the consumer entertainment market, launching its own television network and acquiring cable and satellite television broadcasters and Internet service providers across the Pacific region. States have accordingly revisited their relationship with the mobile network operator in response to changing licence requirements and regulatory environments.

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It is not easy for anthropologists to keep up with the mobile revolution in the Pacific Islands, especially in the highly diverse countries of Melanesia, which the chapters in this volume highlight. Take, for instance, Papua New Guinea. By 2010, all of the billboards in towns and point-of-purchase signage in rural areas that had once advertised Coca-Cola soft drinks in red and white were replaced with publicity for Digicel. Only the colours remained the same (Figure 1). While researchers were just beginning to consider the opportunities that widespread use of basic handsets for voice calls and texting might afford people across the nation, the uptake of inexpensive smartphones subsidised by mobile network operators had already begun.

By 2016, there were some 800,000 smartphone users and 400,000 Facebook users in Papua New Guinea. The number of Internet users as a result had increased from under 2 per cent of the population in 2010 to over 11 per cent. And the potential for phone-enabled access to social media was becoming clearer. On 7 June 2016, the *Guardian* (Davidson 2016) reported in its US online edition that police in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea's capital, had opened fire on university students protesting government corruption. The report contained a brief video clip, apparently

recorded on a smartphone and uploaded to a Twitter account, in which gunshots could be heard. New technologies were making it possible for international news agencies to spread accounts of events in locales where few foreign correspondents tread and, perforce, for mobile phone users, acting as citizens, to redefine their relations to the state. This latter possibility is one example of what we have in mind when speaking of the moral economy of mobile phones.

Figure 1. Digicel billboard in Goroka, 2014
Source: Photo by R. Foster

Mobile Phones from a Moral Economy Perspective

The idea of a 'moral economy' acquires significance by contrast with an ideological notion of 'market economy' (see Thompson 1967, 1971). This notion of market economy refers to a world characterised as modern in which people meet each other as transactors and only as transactors – strangers who seek to maximise their own interests within the limits of custom and the law. Such transactions presuppose no prior relationship between the parties involved and entail no obligation to sustain

a relationship once the transaction is complete. Friendship and kinship, loyalty and propinquity are all beside the point. Economic activity is disconnected from other considerations and other ways of reckoning exchange, and disembedded from social relations that might entangle and motivate buyers and sellers (Polanyi 1957).

Regardless of whether such a cold and impersonal economy exists, its force as a rhetorical image is undeniably real. On the one hand, anthropologists since Marcel Mauss have used the idea of such a market economy as a foil for the notion of a gift economy and for a more humane form of capitalism. On the other hand, the people that anthropologists sometimes study have themselves used the idea to imagine alternative and positively valued forms of tradition and custom. The aim of these critiques is simply to affirm that production and exchange, distribution and consumption all involve, inevitably and irreducibly, multi-stranded and durable relations among human beings inhabiting shared social circumstances.

For our purposes in this volume, the moral economy of mobile phones implies a field of shifting relations among *consumers*, *companies* and *state agents*, all of whom have their own ideas about what is good, proper and just. These ideas inform the ways in which, for example, consumers acquire and use mobile phones; companies market and sell voice, SMS and data subscriptions; and state agents regulate both the everyday use of mobile phones and the market activity of licensed competitors. Ambivalence, disagreement and ongoing negotiation about who owes what to whom are thus integral features of the moral economy of mobile phones.

Companies, consumers and state agents all impinge upon each other in ways that make it difficult to consider one apart from the others. Telecommunications companies may not operate without state-issued spectrum licences; consumers cannot operate their mobile phones without registering their SIM cards, a requirement that states oblige companies to enforce; and states count on the revenue of taxes and fees collected from companies. Nevertheless, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, it is possible to bring one of the three actors into the foreground while temporarily placing the other two in the background.

Consumers

Looking at what consumers do with mobile phones has so far been the strength of the emerging anthropological literature based on ethnographic research in Melanesia (see, for example, Andersen 2013; Lipset 2013; Jorgensen 2014; Telban and Vávrová 2014; Kraemer 2015; Macdonald and Kirami 2015; Taylor 2015). The chapters in this volume extend this work, demonstrating how consumers navigate the possibilities and perils of creating novel forms of interpersonal intimacy at the same time that they purchase and exchange airtime (phone credit) with expectations and ideals derived from longstanding practices of reciprocity and kinship.

Mobile phone use entails both continuity and change in the practices by which people produce social relations. For example, the mobile phone has become an increasingly important tool for consolidating, expanding and managing social networks. Holly Wardlow notes in her chapter in this volume (Chapter 2) that women, in particular, have embraced mobile phones as a way to stay in touch with close natal kin after marriage into their husband's household. David Lipset (Chapter 1) convincingly demonstrates how rural residents of the Lower Sepik River area of Papua New Guinea put the mobile phone in the service of consolidating kinship across the physical distance separating town and village. A single handset, fortuitously located in one of the few spots where a connection to the Digicel network is relatively reliable, enables rural–urban communications that facilitate the discharge of moral obligations associated with reciprocal gift giving. Indeed, the owners of the handset make it available to other community members as a gift, declining to charge their neighbours a fee for using the phone and instead relying on occasional counter-gifts of airtime (credit) to keep the service active.

Similarly, Daniela Kraemer (Chapter 5) shows how young men in Port Vila effectively continue the practices of village 'big men' by accumulating relationships, adding contacts to their mobile phones in an effort to expand a personal network that can be drawn upon for support when necessary (see also Servy 2014). Yet, while there is undoubtedly continuity, there is simultaneously change, for young men attempt to create personal networks of support in a social context where they have diminishing access to the resources of kin in town and relatives in rural homes. Accordingly, these young men often seek to recruit strangers to their networks, calculating the marginal value of a new contact in terms of its potential as a source of future support. Such calculations can lead to the

sort of rational cost–benefit analysis associated with market transactions: Is it worth it to me to respond to this request for credit, or to answer that call? Robert Foster (Chapter 6) demonstrates that this kind of calculation can involve relations with kin as well as strangers, and is a function more generally of managing the exigencies of prepaid phone subscriptions in which constant awareness of one's current balance is a practical necessity. Prepaid subscriptions can thus function as technologies for promoting forms of self-discipline and budgeting reminiscent of the personal ethics of Max Weber's ascetic Protestants.

Figure 2. bmobile-vodafone headquarters in Port Moresby, 2017
Source: Photo by R. Foster

It is perhaps the combination of intimacy and strangeness made possible by mobile phones that marks something new under the sun in Melanesia (and elsewhere; see, for example, Archambault 2013; Gilbert 2016). The random dialling in search of 'phone friends' and the uneasy, fantastic relationships that develop between persons who never meet face-to-face and who never know for sure the true identity of their interlocutors afford a new kind of pleasurable sociality (Andersen 2013; Jorgensen 2014). Affective intimacy is possible, but at a distance that protects the parties in the relationship from their vulnerability to each other's demands

(often sexual demands placed on women by men). Wardlow's chapter examines an extraordinary example of such sociality in which Lucy, an HIV-positive woman marginalised by her own kin, received emotional comfort and material support from an intimate stranger, Angela, a woman living in a nearby town who responded to Lucy's random call with compassion. The case of Lucy and Angela dramatically reveals how mobile phones have been configured by some consumers as 'affective technologies': tools that enable people – especially women – to escape the constraints not only of physical distance, but also of gendered relations of power.

State Agents and Agencies

State agents and agencies shape the moral economy of mobile phones in numerous ways. The executive decision to open up national markets to foreign companies is often legitimated as a democratic effort to make telecommunications accessible and affordable to all people. Once this goal has been more or less achieved, state agents often attempt to regulate the various ends to which consumers put new technologies, such as the use of mobile phones for online consumption of pornography and dissemination of political critique through social media such as Facebook. In Papua New Guinea, SIM card registration became mandatory in early 2016. The legislation requires Digicel and bmobile-vodafone to collect and archive personal information about all SIM card owners at point of sale. The legislation was introduced along with a new cybercrime policy, the stated intention of which is to address the abuse of mobile phones in making harassing or fraudulent calls and the use of social media to transmit defamatory, 'false' and 'offensive' claims (Pacific Media Centre 2015).

In Fiji, SIM card registration became mandatory in 2010. According to a 2 July 2010 report from Radio New Zealand, 'The Attorney General, Aiyaz Sayed Khaiyum, says a significant number of telephone users are misusing the service, including making bogus and threatening calls, and bomb threats' (Radio New Zealand 2010). Nevertheless, critics of the regime that came to power in 2009 led by Commodore Voreqe 'Frank' Bainimarama saw the decree as part of a more extensive initiative to monitor telecommunications (see, for example, Hayes 2010). In Papua New Guinea, too, SIM card registration and the cybercrime policy promoted by the National Information and Communications Technology Authority (NICTA) attracted strong criticism. Former prime minister

Sir Mekere Morauta declared the new regulations a threat to freedom of speech and the freedom and independence of the media: 'These precious rights and freedoms are under attack as never before by a Prime Minister demonstrably determined to silence legitimate criticism, including criticism of the official corruption that appears to exist at the heart of government' (Pacific Media Centre 2015).

These concerns about unwanted and unwarranted state surveillance resonate with the anxieties expressed by Jorgensen's (Chapter 3) interlocutor, Toby, regarding the spectre of American and Chinese imperialism and the prospect of a one-world government. Toby interprets the cell towers installed by Digicel as signs and instruments of an impending apocalypse, the result of power exerted by foreign (corporate) entities beyond the control of the PNG state. Toby's close reading of the new 100 kina banknote, adorned with an image of a cell tower, reasonably poses the moral question of who indeed owns and controls the nation's telecommunications network. Liberalisation in Papua New Guinea – a response to the state's own failure to deliver telecommunications services to the mass of the people – effectively put large chunks of this network in the hands of a privately owned offshore corporation.

Toby's anxieties prompt consideration of the various ways in which state agencies collaborate with companies (some state-owned) in building and maintaining the material infrastructure that subtends mobile communications and information technologies. In Papua New Guinea, NICTA requires Digicel to extend its network into some rural areas where market considerations might not prove to be an incentive – a challenge that Digicel has more than met (even if some areas, such as the Murik Lakes described by Lipset (Chapter 1), remain without reliable connectivity). State agents – namely, individual members of parliament – can generate goodwill among their constituents by securing Digicel towers with the use of discretionary funds or by arranging for very small aperture terminal (VSAT) connections. Through such acts, MPs discharge their moral obligation to bring development in the form of goods and services to the people whom they represent.

Similarly, although Digicel has built an extensive network of cell towers throughout the country, it must still deal with the PNG state for access to the undersea fibre-optic networks that land at Port Moresby and Madang. The fees associated with such access, and the present state and future capacity of the undersea cables themselves, are currently issues of

political contention. The plan to create a national transmission network (NTN) calls for a new state-owned entity, DataCo, that will function as the wholesale seller of bandwidth to retailers such as Digicel. But the plan hinges on Telikom, the state-owned company responsible for landlines, yielding control of the international cable gateways – one of its most valuable assets (see Oxford Business Group 2014).[3]

Figure 3. A Vodafone retail agent in Suva, 2017
Source: Photo by R. Foster

The NTN is publicly represented as a kind of moral action: the state's effort to meet the challenge of making mobile communication – in particular, access to broadband – affordable and available to all. In this regard, the NTN continues the more familiar work of the state regulator (NICTA in Papua New Guinea) responsible for maintaining a level playing field for competition in the telecommunications industry. Such interventions have included pressure on companies in Papua New Guinea to make their networks inter-operable and, in Fiji, to reduce the rates charged for voice calls made from one network to another. These interventions are sometimes undertaken by non-state actors who advance the cause of consumer citizenship by appealing to a notion of universal human rights. In Fiji, for example, the Consumer Council lobbies both companies and state agencies to implement policies and practices that protect and empower individuals for whom mobile connectivity has

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3   In February 2017, the PNG Government announced the amalgamation of DataCo, bmobile-vodafone and Telikom under a new name, Kumul Telikom.

become a fundamental necessity (Consumer Council of Fiji 2014). In this sense, the mobile phone becomes – like clean water and access to healthcare – a sign and instrument of belonging in a modern world order. In such an order, unlike in Toby's dystopic universe, the rights of individuals command respect.

Companies

The flipside of consumer citizenship is corporate citizenship (see Foster 2008). Companies, like state agents, fashion themselves as positive moral agents through a variety of techniques. These techniques range from supporting highly visible public programs of corporate social responsibility to circulating even more visible advertising images on billboards, in newspapers and through online social media. By these means mobile network operators stake out their places in the moral economy vis-à-vis each other and the broader public of citizens and consumers, whose interests the companies address.

Heather Horst's chapter (Chapter 4) demonstrates how Digicel in Fiji competes with its well-resourced rival, Vodafone, in what might be regarded as a tournament of consumer citizenship that renders alternative claims to national service as rival marketing propositions. Vodafone Fiji, now a wholly locally owned entity, returns shareholder value to the Fiji National Provident Fund, which in turn pays dividends to the people. The company thus fulfils its obligation to share its profits with all Fijians (something that Digicel, as a privately owned company – mostly by one man who resides for tax purposes in Malta – cannot claim as plausibly). Citizenship moves into the foreground. Digicel, however, boasts lower rates and extensive coverage in rural areas long neglected by the state-owned telecommunications providers. Actual consumer benefits thus eclipse promises of national citizenship.

Advertising and marketing campaigns for mobile services reveal how corporate personnel imagine the communities that they seek to engage. In Melanesia, this imagination often unfolds in national(istic) terms (Foster 2005), such as in the duelling advertisements that Digicel and Vodafone launched in in Fiji in 2008 (Horst, Chapter 4). Missteps can occur, of course, as when some of Digicel's snappy youth-oriented advertisements were perceived as Caribbean imports unsuited to the conservative moral climate of Fiji. But sponsorship, philanthropy and disaster relief provide ongoing evidence of active participation in and

commitment to the national communities in which companies operate. Digicel and Vodafone thus fashion themselves as super-citizens, willing and able to take on responsibilities that exceed their obligations as market actors.

Mobile marketing stimulates not only the collective imagination, but also, in the form of promotions, the consumption of individual mobile users. Many of these promotions, circulated through text messages sent sometimes several times a day (or night!), seek to engage consumers in an exchange relationship. In exchange for topping up airtime credit by a certain amount, for example, a consumer will receive 'free' talk-time to be used during a certain period of the day. Or consumers will be 'rewarded' with extra airtime credit if they top up on a particular day of the week. These promotions, which can be precisely targeted at consumers on the basis of the data that usage generates, suggest that the companies recognise their moral obligations to acknowledge the gift of patronage offered by their consumers. By the same token, these promotions, as well as other services that companies provide, such as the opportunity to receive a loan of airtime credit (at about 30 per cent interest), shape the moral economy of phone use. Individuals defer calls to certain times of day, or send text messages instead of making voice calls, as part of an effort to conserve and extend scarce resources (see Foster, Chapter 6). Promotions often exert a paradoxical effect on consumers, enticing them to spend in order to save; that is, to demonstrate their thriftiness through an increase in consumption. Some promotions, however, go further, enticing consumers to increase consumption through participation in contests for prizes that critics, such as Fiji's Consumer Council, liken to an unregulated form of gambling. In these cases, the consumer is imagined less as a partner in a relationship of mutual exchange and more as a desiring subject from whom revenue can be extracted.

Towards a Moral Economy of Mobile Phones in Melanesia

The anthropology of mobile phones has perhaps given more attention to how consumers use ('appropriate' or 'domesticate') a relatively new technology than to how companies and state actors enable and regulate such use (see, however, Doron and Jeffrey 2013). Unsurprisingly, ethnographic approaches to phone usage have revealed, if not celebrated,

local variations in how the technology has been taken up, a function of variation in the social and cultural imperatives of the users themselves. Consider, for example, the unforeseen popularity of texting in the Philippines (Pertierra et al. 2002), 'link-up' in Jamaica (Horst and Miller 2005) and even 'phone friends' in Papua New Guinea (Andersen 2013) and Vanuatu (Kraemer 2015).

The chapters in this volume demonstrate similar instances of cultural creativity and rightly emphasise the agency of people such as Toby and Lucy and Angela in making mobile phones what they are in Melanesia. But the moral economy framework proposed here and developed in the following chapters also seeks to extend our view of the socio-material network that mobile phones bring into being. This network includes, at a minimum, the consumers who use the phones, the companies that supply consumers with handsets and airtime, and the state agents that regulate (even if haphazardly) both telecommunications companies and the infrastructure that subtends mobile phones. It is the effects of all the elements in this network – including the phones themselves as material objects with definite qualities – that at any given moment inform what an ethnographic approach can tell us about mobile phones in Melanesia or elsewhere. Put differently, while it is certainly important not to reduce phone usage to the automatic outcome of either corporate strategies or state policies, it is equally important to acknowledge that such usage happens in circumstances that users themselves have not chosen. The chapters in this volume respond to this double challenge.

In lieu of a conclusion, the book ends with the comments of Jeffrey Mantz and Margaret Jolly, who reflect upon the contribution of the chapters both to the anthropology of Melanesia and Oceania and to a general understanding of the processes that underpin the mobile revolution globally.

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