

Cell Phones and Alienation among Bulsa of Ghana's Upper East Region: "The Call Calls You Away"

Marcus D. Watson and Evans A. Atuick

Abstract: Many scholars have concluded, perhaps prematurely, that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are inherently empowering for Africans. In order to look more closely at the impact of ICTs on relationships and society, this article focuses on everyday life. Specifically, it uses ethnographic methods and the theory of "affordances" to illuminate the use of cell phones among Bulsa of Ghana's Upper East Region. While cell phones help users connect with distant loved ones, they also plant seeds of alienation between users and those who remain physically present. These changes are evident in new body habits and in social behaviors that would be culturally unacceptable in face-to-face interactions but are largely excused in the interventions of the virtual world.

Résumé: De nombreux chercheurs ont conclu, peut-être prématurément, que les technologies de l'information et de la communication (TIC) étaient des outils de libération pour les Africains. Afin d'examiner de plus près l'impact des TIC sur les relations et la société, cet article se concentre sur certains aspects de la vie quotidienne. Plus précisément, il utilise des méthodes ethnographiques et la théorie de Gibson du principe d'"affordance" pour mettre en lumière l'impact de l'utilisation des téléphones cellulaires chez les Bulsa de la région nord est du Ghana. Bien que les téléphones cellulaires permettent aux utilisateurs de communiquer avec leurs

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proches éloignés, ils plantent aussi des graines d'aliénation entre les utilisateurs et ceux qui restent physiquement présents. Ces changements sont évidents dans de nouveaux comportements physiques et sociaux qui seraient culturellement inacceptables en face-à-face, mais qui sont largement tolérées dans le contexte du monde virtuel.

Keywords: Cell phones; interpersonal relationships; affordances theory; social change; Ghana

In the scholarship on information and communication technologies (ICTs) in sub-Saharan African, a tension exists between the idea that ICTs lead to empowerment and the actual use of ICTs. Scholars (though with a few exceptions) tend to see ICTs as instrumental in empowering everyone, from women and youth to civil society and the poor.¹ The basic premise is that ICTs, such as cell phones and Internet applications like Facebook and Skype, level the playing field when it comes to access to information and ease of communication across distances. With cell phones in particular, which are affordable to both wealthier and poorer Africans as well as urban and rural dwellers alike, information and communication are literally and figuratively in everyone's hands—equally. The idea is so powerful that several African governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) explicitly assert a positive link between access to ICTs and development (see Hennessy et al. 2010; Zawada et al. 2007).

Curiously, however, a close reading of these and other studies suggests that many Africans value ICTs primarily for staying connected with loved ones. A study of diverse African countries concludes, for example, that the “dominant reason given in all three countries [for using mobile phones] was in the category of social/chatting to family and friends” (Porter et al. 2012:149). The finding that a loved one and a business partner are sometimes the same person (Donner 2008; Molony 2007; Sey 2011) only underscores the importance of personal relationships. Thus, although there are certainly individuals who use cell phones for entrepreneurial, development, and other empowering purposes, investing in personal relationships appears to be a top priority. This is doubly curious. First, it raises doubt about the idea of ICTs as the “empowerment machines” they are often made out to be; second, it draws attention away from distant relationships and back toward relationships at home, raising the following general question framing this article: How might an up-close study of the everyday relationship between ICTs and their users challenge the easy association some scholars and policymakers are drawing between ICTs and empowerment?

In tying their research questions to the promise of ICT empowerment in Africa, scholars have tended to overlook this kind of question, which asks us to look more carefully at the uses and impacts of ICTs in everyday relationships before skipping ahead to assumptions about ICTs and empowerment. In fact, in their tendency to view ICTs primarily as empowerment machines, some studies appear to view Africans using ICTs to satisfy

personal desires as examples of wasted potential. Thus, when Veli Jiyane and Janneke Mosteret (2010) found that women hawkers and vendors in South Africa use their ICTs to invest more in personal relationships than in accessing business information, their response was to recommend that governments and NGOs introduce “innovative skills training . . . through which women entrepreneurs can be trained at times and locations convenient to them” (2010:60). Our contention, by contrast, is that it is advisable to put aside efforts at forcing individuals to fit into a normative set of behaviors and instead to take their priorities seriously. If people are using ICTs to satisfy personal rather than empowerment relationships, such priorities suggest that we should look more closely at ICT use in relation to the personal, the private, and the domestic.

Based on an ethnographic study focusing on the everyday use of cell phones among Balsa from Ghana's Upper East Region, this article is an effort at taking the priority of the personal seriously.² The setting is appropriate, first, because of the region's persistent poverty (see Whitehead 2006) and associated social problems, from rampant and dangerous child labor practices (Hilson 2010) to discrimination against females (Ako & Akweongo 2009). According to the ICTs-for-empowerment argument, in other words, the Upper East Region ought to be a place where individuals would hasten to use ICTs for economic development. The setting is also ideal because of the collectivist quality of Balsa's social milieu, where face-to-face interactions are considered of paramount importance. Thus the effects of virtual communication on interpersonal relationships are especially interesting, and indeed we noted the existence of a dynamic interplay among spoken words, body gestures, emotional expressions, and cellular devices. This microsocial view makes it clear that ICTs are not just small objects in the background of human actions and interactions, as the ICT-as-empowerment studies tend to assume; rather, they exert significant influence on human behavior and thought and must therefore be theorized as partners in human agency. To account for the role played by cell phones, the article makes use of James Gibson's theory of “affordances” (1979, 1982), which illuminates how objects oblige users to behave and think in a range of ways based on their functions and qualities.

The study found that while cell phones facilitate long-distance communication, they also plant seeds of alienation between users and those who are physically present. The alienation manifests itself in the human bodies themselves, retraining them to pivot away from the “face-to-face” and toward the “virtual.” The increasing alienation observed was not total in its effects, but it was also more than just a clever adaptation. Significantly, if ICTs such as cell phones empower Balsa in relation to the wider world, they seem to exact a price locally in the form of alienation and strained interpersonal relations.

Affordances: The Agency of Cell Phones in Human Interactions

Many articles in academic journals and the popular press acknowledge that ICTs are invested with great power and agency. According to some

perspectives, that capacity is alarming; we may read, thus, that cell phone use increases vehicular accidents (*Brooks Bulletin* 2010), lures children into viewing dangerous websites (*Daily Yomiuri* 2009), and may cause cancer (AllAfrica.com 2011). But we also read that cell phones are “enabling people to keep in touch” (Goering 2006), coming “to [the] rescue of Africa’s health sector” (Colombant 2011), and powering a “financial revolution” (Bengali 2009). But while it is generally recognized that cell phones in fact do all of these things, it is not as widely acknowledged that cell phones themselves are not just inert objects devoid of agency waiting for human agents to pick them up and use them as they see fit. If cell phones indeed have an impact on human life and help to constitute human action, we ought to be asking questions about how exactly they do so. The theory of “affordances” is useful in responding to such questions.

The notion of “affordances” can be traced to James Gibson’s studies of ecological psychology (Gibson 1979, 1982), in which Gibson sought to overcome modernity’s assumption of an ontological split between living organisms and the natural environment. In particular, he asked how the material environment “affords,” or invites, living organisms to consider a range of behaviors tied to their unique physical, psychological, and cultural capacities. Thus a swamp may afford shelter for a crocodile, drinking for a hippo, standing for a mosquito, and hunting for a person. Gibson suggested that living organisms do not choose their courses of action freely but must base their decisions on possibilities and limitations etched directly into their physical attributes and the material environment. In this sense, there is no agency for living organisms without a material baseline provided by the natural world. Gibson did not attribute any kind of animism to objects—there is no assertion, for instance, that objects are endowed with spiritual force. He suggested, rather, that objects in the natural world appear enticing or repellent depending on the perceptions of the living organisms that interact with them. Dant (2004) has called this their “invitation character.” Living organisms and the natural world they inhabit thus share an ontological status, with each helping to constitute the other.

The work of Donald Norman (1988) extended the notion of affordances to apply to human-made artifacts as well as to natural objects. In fact, Norman found that affordances tend to be built into the designs of artifacts intentionally (see Hutchby 2001). Thus a doorknob invites being turned by an adult, or might invite a child to dangle from it. A doorplate invites being pushed. The invitations built into artifacts do not determine human action but are compelling: If the doorplate on a swinging door is replaced by a doorknob, an unsuspecting adult is likely to reach for the doorknob and turn it, only to find that the door works by being pushed. In fact, affordances are structured not just into isolated objects but into all human creations, including routine social practices (Raudaskoski 2003). For example, in Ghana, if an elder person shouts, “Come here,” you are afforded two choices: either going to the elder or saying “I’m coming,” even without actually doing so. Other responses (such as “No” or “Later, I’m busy right now”)

would be considered rude. Clearly such affordances are culturally specific; a Westerner, for example, might perceive a promise that is never intended to be fulfilled not as polite but as evasive, dishonest, or even morally repugnant.

To be clear, affordances theory cannot explain how cell phone use is changing Bursa agency; rather it helps us examine what cell phones are inviting Bursa to do and how they are responding to the invitation. Without necessarily using the word “affordances,” many scholars speak of ICTs as supporting a compressed experience of space and time (e.g., Geser 2004; Raudaskoski 2003). That is, interpersonal context, or “where you are” and “when you’re there,” becomes insignificant in cell phone communication—think of how a cell phone can ring in someone’s pocket no matter what that person is doing or where he or she is. The ways in which cellular devices can make time and space feel insignificant has its advantages; for example, the capacity to turn off the ringer on a phone allows a person to avoid a potentially uncomfortable encounter. However, while the agency of this individual still exists, the device has also obliged the user to “think twice.” In this way the idea of affordances enriches the study of the everyday life—instead of seeing a cell phone in someone’s hand and interpreting the scene simplistically as “an agent holding a thing,” we can now see that the cell phone and its user are influencing each other.

In the spirit of conducting an empirical investigation of the impact of cellular devices on face-to-face relations among Bursa, we pose the above idea of cell phones and affordances as a question instead of as a statement of fact. Our objective is an analysis “from below,” by means of observations and participation in the phenomenon, rather than “from above” according to preconceived concepts and definitions. Thus we ask a number of questions. How do Bursa individuals respond to the call of their cell phones? Do all individuals respond in the same way or is there a diversity of responses? Do cellular devices invite Bursa to experience interpersonal context as insignificant for communication? The next section provides background information about Ghana’s Bursa community, including the basics of their history in the region, social and economic lifestyle, range of attitudes toward cell phone use, and cultural ways of relating in face-to-face situations. The section ends with a discussion of the methods used to conduct the study.

Bursa of Buluk: Ethnographic Setting and Research Methodology

Bursa total roughly one hundred thousand and live mostly in the Bursa North and South Districts of Ghana’s Upper East Region, formerly part of Britain’s Northern Territories of the Gold Coast colony. The indirect rule of the British led to the promotion of a paramount chief and a state, whereas before colonialism Bursa were likely governed by chiefs who were not hierarchically ordered (Der 2001). The paramount chief now rules over four major towns, twelve subchiefs, and many villagers who live in family

compounds within Buluk, the name of the Bursa chiefdom (Wanitzek 1999). Situated in West Africa's savannah belt, most Bursa subsist on family farming, growing crops such as millet, sorghum, and groundnuts mainly for household consumption. Farming families also rely on cash remittances from migrants, many of whom work for a pittance on lucrative cocoa plantations and gold mines located in Ghana's southern regions. Income also trickles in from a small percentage of children who engage in unregulated, small-scale gold mining in Kadema and other places in Buluk; this has inspired international campaigns against child labor, although without equal attention paid to the lack of formal employment alternatives (Hilson 2010). Evidence of cash remittances is most conspicuous in Bursa's rural homes, where, as with their Tallensi neighbors (Gabrilopoulos et al. 2002), a shoulder-high circular mud wall connects thatch-roofed mud rooms and zinc-roofed brick rooms in a fusing of local and global symbols. In Buluk towns there is less evidence of earthen constructions, with government officials and small business owners living in single-family or compound homes made of concrete or brick.

As Bursa homes indicate, Buluk, like other rural areas of West Africa (Piot 1999), is agrarian but not remote, everywhere marked by its connections to wider regional and global worlds (Chalfin 2003; Kröger & Meier 2003). Other markings include motor vehicles—especially motorcycles—humming along paved, if potholed, roads connecting Buluk's larger towns; Internet cafés frequented mostly by youth, the most affluent of whom dress in the latest African American styles; the naming of village soccer teams after popular clubs in England; and an influx of market products from Asia, Europe, the U.S., and southern Ghana. Nevertheless, a number of social practices and beliefs cross-cut the markers of global and local, compelling the attention, respect, and compliance of most Bursa, irrespective of generation, gender, and class status. In order to marry, for example, Bursa must respect the tradition whereby the suitor, along with a friend (*san-yigma*), visits the woman's house, provides gifts, and eventually asks the mother's permission to marry the daughter. If permission is granted, members of the suitor's family must initiate the process of "opening the gate" (*akayale*) by offering items such as tobacco, a drink, and money to the woman's family as an official announcement of marriage. The "gate is closed" (*nansiung-ligka*) several years later, when the husband's family, again through the *san-yigma*, offers sacrifices of a fowl, sheep, or goat in a ceremony acknowledging the fertility of the marriage (Wanitzek 1999).

If marriage is an agreement between two families, it is also sanctioned by ancestor spirits (Kröger 2003; Schott 1987; Wanitzek 1999:133). Ancestors of the woman's family are informed about every step in the marriage process, from the suitor's desire to marry into the family to the woman's entering more permanently into the man's family after *nansiung-ligka*. Indeed, nearly every facet of a Bursa's life, no matter the person's lifestyle, is infused with the presence of the spiritual realm. Most Bursa believe in a supreme being, although followers of traditional religion, as well as many nominal

Christians and Muslims, make offerings indirectly to ancestors and other deities. Spirits of the earth, ancestors, and animals, mongooses in particular, are offered sacrifices at their own shrines, called *tengsa*, *wen-bogluta*, *jadok*, and *juik*, respectively (Kröger 2005). In each case, the ancestor or deity intervenes in the lives of those paying tribute, who may be seeking permission, assistance, or forgiveness for events related to farming or the human life cycle (Atuick 2013). Burial rites are the most extensive human life-cycle events. Here, ensuring that the deceased transitions well to the “land of the dead” (*kpilung*) is critically important, especially to the farming families who depend on a compound’s divine spirits for plentiful rain, fertile fields, and good harvests. Funeral rites also have implications for the succession of property, making it crucial for them to proceed without conflict by participants, including in-laws who are in attendance.

The above descriptions of marriage and religion show that the fates of most families in Buluk are tied together in both visible and invisible realms of life, regardless of a family’s social or occupational status. Life in Buluk is characterized by collectivist assumptions that the interests of the group or relationship take precedence over the interests of the individual (Hofstede 1980). In daily life, Balsa agency may therefore be considered “domesticated”—as Nyamnjoh (2001) uses the term in reference to matters of witchcraft in Cameroon. In this context the suggestion is that as individuals pursue their own goals they are mindful that their achievements benefit, or appear to benefit, others—members of a family lineage, an in-law relationship, a friendship group, or Buluk as a whole, both the living and the physically deceased. Balsa agency is therefore not the “free choice” agency associated with contemporary Western societies. Individualism is certainly increasing in Buluk; for instance, the advent of sun-dried bricks has allowed men to build houses without the help of others, and the development of a cash economy and income-generating employment has allowed sons to distance themselves from their families and from the control of fathers (Kröger 2009). Nevertheless, individual striving is attentive to relations in space (with living others), in time (with elders and close ancestors), and in the spiritual realm (with spiritual beings).

To answer the questions about the way cell phones have been incorporated into these aspects of Bulak culture, the authors carried out research activities in the summer of 2012 in Sandema, the central town and seat of the district offices.³ As cell phones are used everywhere, we accompanied about forty participants to their places of residence, work, and leisure. We took note of how the use of cell phones affected face-to-face interactions in everyday life, paying special attention to their influence on verbal communication and body behavior. We also noted variables such as age, gender, class status, occupation, and setting to see if any had a differential influence on behavior and attitudes. We also conducted eighteen more formal interviews of participants representing a range of diverse subject positions, although many of these interviews took on the conversational and familiar tone that may be inevitable among people who have become friendly and collegial.

Bulsa and Cell Phones: Findings

Cell phones (*tangalik*) are widely used in Buluk and are deemed indispensable by most Bulsa, although many users do not own phones. Those without phones either use those of relations or friends or else own SIM cards, which allow them to make or receive a call or message by inserting the cards into someone else's phone. Bulsa use the devices to view websites and to stay in touch with friends, lovers, and kin who have migrated for work or education. Most Bulsa who own cell phones always carry their devices with them, even into bathing areas (because they do not want others looking at private messages stored in their phones). Many youth smuggle their devices into schools, even though cell phone use has been banned by the Ghana Education Service as a distraction to teaching and learning (Panest 2010). Some parents, mostly from the subsistence class of Buluk, complain that their children are exposed to unsavory images and ideas by surfing the Internet on their phones and that phones lead children to neglect their responsibilities at home, although this is a minority opinion. Many professionals, such as public administrators, police officers, and nurses, can articulate the pros and cons of cell phone use but end up saying that the positive outweighs the negative or that, in any case, the devices are here to stay.

If the discourse around cell phones is somewhat diverse, the actual use of the devices proved consistent and similar to behaviors observed outside of Africa (see, e.g. Tenner 2003). Six examples illustrating various elements but chosen from diverse subjects, settings, and situations are provided below. To the extent that the same basic elements manifest themselves across the diversity of cases, we concluded that we are likely looking at a social phenomenon rather than a coincidence.⁴

Diaspora Bulsa Surprised by His Own Behavior

While standing on the porch of a middle-class home in Sandema, we chatted with Adawen, a Bulsa on vacation from teaching high school in Germany. Atuick has known Adawen for years, and Watson had met him on Facebook. As our informal talk moved to the subject of digital devices, Adawen praised digital media for bringing the world closer together. "Obviously, they connect people," he said, "I can talk with my son and he's in Germany." He then pointed to Azong, the brother of the owner of the home, who was talking on his cell phone: "You see, Azong is talking right now to his boy [i.e., live-in servant] in Accra. The phone does that. It connects people." Atuick asked, "But isn't Azong kind of separated from us?" Adawen answered, "Yes, but he'll be back with us just now." After a few seconds Adawen's phone rang. He looked down at the device, looked up at us with a smile, raised his pointer finger and said "Just a minute," and walked a few steps away to answer the call. When he returned to our conversation he said with a hint of irony, "Well, I hope you forgive me. It was my son." Pensive for a several seconds, he continued while looking down at his phone, "Yes, I get what you're saying. The call kind of calls you away."

High School Students Leaving School

Throughout our field work in Sandema, we observed secondary school students walking from school on the main road toward the town center. A persistent observation was that the crowd was divided between students who were using cell phones and those who were not. The division between them was not precise, like a border, but was regular in the sense that cell phone users, who were in the minority, walked among the throng of students but with an extra cushion of space around them. Students obviously provided the cushion as a way of respecting the privacy of their classmates' phone conversations. As the crowd moved across our sight, cell phone users were like steady nodal points in the crowd; other students walked past them, or ran up to or away from them while playing games that looked like "tag" but may have been forms of flirting. When a student hung up the phone, he or she would leave the relatively isolated space and reengage classmates from the non-phone crowd, again becoming part of the fluid movement. Similarly, when a student answered a call, he or she would move away and assume the isolated position.

A certain incident prompted us to interview two girls from among a crowd of students. As she walked with two classmates, Ayonpouk slowed down to make a call. After five seconds, she stopped completely while turning back toward the school to look for her friend Asibi. As her classmates continued along without her, she waved her hand in the air until Asibi saw her. Ayonpouk hung up the phone and made another call, all the while standing in place until Asibi caught up. When Asibi arrived, she touched Ayonpouk on the shoulder as a way of saying, "Let's go." As they started walking together toward the town center, Asibi called someone on her phone and began talking. Ayonpouk and Asibi walked side-by-side into the distance, each one on the phone with someone else. In an interview the next day Watson asked Ayonpouk why she had wanted to be sure that Asibi was with her but then had proceeded to talk to someone else on the phone. Ayonpouk responded, "I won't leave her behind. She's my friend," to which Asibi interjected, "You know it's fun to talk on the phone." Sadia Akambasi-Watson, Marcus Watson's wife, asked, "To your boyfriends?" and Ayonpouk said (with seeming embarrassment), "No, to our friends at school—just to tell them about the day." Atuick asked, "But why don't you talk with Asibi about the day?" and after a pause Asibi said again, "Well, you know, it's fun to talk on the phone."

Young Man Puts Callers First

Late one morning we sat with two Balsa men and one woman in their mid-twenties around a table outside a restaurant in the town center. As the woman, Alamisi, was talking, Atigsi's phone rang. He swiveled in his chair to better reach the phone in his pocket, drew it out, looked to see who was calling, stood up and answered the phone, and walked to the side of the

road to hold a conversation. As he approached the roadside, a middle-aged man walked past and greeted him, but Atigsi did not seem to hear or see him. Atigsi talked on the phone for about two minutes, during which time other pedestrians walked past but did not greet him, and no one at our table tried to get his attention. When Atigsi returned to the table he made no mention of the received call or caller. Within ten minutes his phone signaled that he had received a text message. Again breaking attention from our conversation, he read the message and then positioned the cell phone just beneath the table to type a response. He then placed the phone on top of the table and, when it signaled another message thirty seconds later, he looked downward to see who was calling but did not respond to the call.

Public Official Angry at his Wife

In Sandema's business section, a district official named Avari and his wife, Anabpouk, were interviewed by Marcus Watson and Sadia Akambasi-Watson under the tin roof extending from a liquor store. Most of the discussion became focused on a cell phone incident. After saying that he had no objections to Anabpouk's owning or using cell phone, Avari amended the comment by recalling a time when he heard an unknown man's voice coming through Anabpouk's phone. Looking at Anabpouk with a sideways glance Avari said, "If a man is calling to sweet talk my wife, that's not acceptable." Anabpouk remained silent. Watson asked, "But how would one know if it's a man or not, or if the man is even trying to get one's wife?" Avari answered, somewhat cryptically, "When I heard the voice and it was a man's voice I didn't know, that cannot happen." "So if you didn't hear a voice, there'd be no problem?" Watson asked. Avari responded, "If there's no voice, there's nothing that can be said. It's no problem. A man cannot walk into my house and speak to my wife." "What if he's quiet?" Watson joked. "What can I do?" Avari said in a tone of defeat.

Boyfriend "Managing" Girlfriends

During an informal interview, a young man named Alandy related a story about an episode of intimacy with one girlfriend, Abawie, during which he received a call from another girlfriend. When his phone rang, he realized that he had "forgot[ten] to change the SIM card," the feature that not only allows a cell phone to be shared among multiple users, but that also allows the owner to manage his contacts and have different ones for family members, professional colleagues, and intimate relations. When meeting with a girlfriend, Alandy said that he usually makes sure to take out the "intimate" card to avoid the possibility that girlfriends will find out about each other. Forgetting to do this "put me in a bind," he remembered with a smile, although "I didn't want to make [Abawie] suspicious. . . . That's why I took my time reaching for the phone." When he saw who the caller was, he lied,

saying that it was a male friend: "That Anum—always wanting to bother me." This was a particularly good ruse, since Alandy knew that Abawie disapproved of Anum and thought he was a bad influence.

Teenager Turning away from his Father

Awenteerum is a well-educated man in his thirties who lives in Wiaga Village, just south of Sandema. At the time that we interviewed him and his family, he had just lost a good-paying job because, according to rumor, his alcoholism could not be tolerated by his employer. During the first interview a friend of his ten-year-old son, Andisi, knocked on the door and was let in by Awenteerum's wife, who asked the friend to wait for the interview to end. During our second visit to Awenteerum's home Andisi received a phone call and answered it without hesitation. Awenteerum pivoted away from his son while motioning with his hand as if to say, "Go ahead and answer the call." As Andisi moved into the distance with the phone, Atuick reminded Awenteerum that during the previous interview Andisi's friend had come to the door and waited for Awenteerum and his son to finish our conversation. "But just now Andisi got a call and you let him go and answer it. What's the difference?" Awenteerum responded, "You don't know who's calling. It could be an urgent matter." During the hour we stayed at Awenteerum's house, Andisi never rejoined the conversation. Andisi later told Watson that his friend had called to invite him to play soccer, which is just what Andisi did.

Cell Phones and Changing Balsa Perceptions: Analysis

The scenarios above illustrate the interesting interactions taking place between human beings and their technological devices in ordinary situations involving cell phones. Clearly the agency being exerted in these interactions is not one way; the human agents are not acting on inert devices, nor are the technological devices determining human behavior. Instead there is a mutuality of influence between human beings and technologies, as highlighted by affordances theory. Thus Balsa cell-phone users made choices. Adawen decided to interrupt our talk to answer the call from his son in Germany; Ayonpouk waited for Asibi to catch up with her because she did not want to leave a friend behind, but she continued talking on the phone; Alandy, in the presence of one girlfriend, ignored a call from another girlfriend with a lie calculated to satisfy the one who was present. But in each case the device itself played a role in the behaviors. Thus Adawen's comment to us ("Just a minute") before taking his son's call resulted from his realization that his phone had rung while we were discussing the question of whether the devices unite or divide people; Ayonpouk's phone allowed her to socialize with one friend who was present and another friend who was elsewhere; and Alandy felt compelled to lie because his phone rang in a compromising situation.

Examining the microsocial dimensions of cellular use in this way shows the mutual influence that exists between human beings and digital devices. Affordances theory pushes the analysis even further, asking us to consider not just the generic influence of technologies on human agency but also the “invitation character” (Dant 2004) specific to the technology in question. In this case the cell phones, in their design and functions, invite Bulsa to opt out of face-to-face conversations in favor of disembodied, virtual, or “tele-present” (Steuer 1992) forms of communication. Thus a ringing phone prompted Adawen to excuse himself from our conversation; Atigsi to walk away from us to the roadside; Alandy to pretend nonchalance while actually stretching to answer the phone before his girlfriend could; and ten-year-old Andisi to walk away from his father for a phone conversation and soccer. The case of Ayonpouk shows that a phone’s invitation is not always associated with ringing. The mere presence of her phone made the thought of stopping and making a call to a friend possible. Similarly, it was not a ringing phone but a suspicious voice coming through his wife’s phone that sparked Avari into action, showing that a disembodied form of communication can prompt a return to face-to-face communication.

In its emphasis on the physical attributes of living organisms and their technologies, affordances theory also helps us to see that the cell phone’s invitation to choose the virtual over the face-to-face depends on a retraining of the human body (Tenner 2003). Thus when Adawen left us to answer the call from his son in Germany, his movement into the distance was mediated by a raised finger and other subtle body gestures that echoed his verbal “Just a minute.” For Ayonpouk, the mere fact of having a phone made it thinkable for her to call her friend, but the thought was rooted more fundamentally in the way her body ground to a halt to make operating the phone while looking for her friend manageable. The bodies of Atigsi and ten-year-old Andisi both moved away from others to hold virtual conversations, though Atigsi’s body movements were particularly “good to think with.” Upon hearing the first ring of his phone, Atigsi swiveled in his chair to position himself to reach into his pocket. At the start of the second ring he was reaching into his pocket and drawing out the phone. By the third ring he was looking to see who was calling while standing up and stepping away from the table. Answering the call pulled him to the roadside, where being on the phone made him oblivious to passersby and effectively untouchable. In short, the cell phone’s invitation to prioritize the virtual over the face-to-face depends on pulling the body out of touch with nearby others—a phenomenon also present and lamented in Western societies (e.g., Emerson 2012; Ross 2014).

Put differently, the use of cell phones is drawing the conscious attention and body behaviors of Bulsa more in the direction of the individualism associated with Western modernity. In communications studies, individualism is associated with “low-context” cultures (Hall 1976), where being frank is considered worth the cost of hurting someone’s feelings (Kim & Sharkey 1995) and where nonverbal behaviors—such as “eye gaze and vocal signals

that exude confidence, strength, and dynamism”—thrive in “environments designed for privacy” (Knapp & Hall 2009:465). This differs from “high-context” cultures such as that of the Balsa, where there tends to be “a high frequency of deference behavior, such as bowing, gaze avoidance, and politeness routines that include the suppression of emotional displays that might offend the group” (Knapp & Hall 2009:465). While Balsa are far from acceding to the regime of attitudes and body habits associated with low-context cultures, their use of cell phones is nudging them in this direction. The ringing phone prompts users to move away from others, and in a manner of speaking, “think away” from others into isolated social spaces. It is not just the movement of the body into the distance that is evident here, but even the smaller gestures, such as the head pivoting toward the sound of the phone and the finger being raised to indicate “just a minute,” which are coming into existence in the context of cell phone use. If the postures of disconnection are not permanent, they are at least suspended for the duration of calls.

In social spaces governed by Western modernity, where independence is a core value, such disconnection may seem par for the course, or at least an individual's prerogative. In a collectivist setting such as the Balsa's in rural West Africa (and perhaps in earlier Western societies or rural areas of current Western societies; see, e.g., Durrenberger 1999; Oyserman et al. 2002; Rheingold 1999), however, such detachment from others can signal anything from rudeness to witchcraft (La Fontaine 2012). During interviews, everyone, regardless of age, gender, or social status, agreed that the sort of intrusions permitted in the context of phone calls would not be tolerated in person. For example, when Watson told the story of Andisi's phone call to a thirty-year-old woman and asked if Andisi, in any other situation, could step away from his father to converse with the friend, she said, “No way. No way. You can't do that.” But the cell phone somehow permitted this behavior without the usual consequences. Similarly, a person on a cell phone is all but off-limits to other people, whereas the same person who may be cooking, farming, or even sleeping is readily approached; there is no question of the person's saying “I'm busy” or showing signs of being disturbed without being accused of antisocial behavior. Balsa, therefore, are making exceptions for behavior related to cell phones that would be unacceptable in other circumstances. But why?

In its recognition that it is not only technologies but also cultural ideas and practices that encode for the “invitation character” of a situation, affordances theory is helpful once again in answering the question. While cell phones seem to invite Balsa to prioritize disembodied communication over face-to-face encounters, Balsa turn to their own cultural conventions to excuse what would otherwise be considered a negative change. For Balsa, the most trusted knowledge still comes from personal experience, an implicit idea shared by other sub-Saharan Africans (e.g., Durham & Klaitz 2002; Lambert & Wood 2005; Mehta et al. 2011). For example, many rural South Africans believe that aid workers have HIV/AIDs: Why else, they ask, would

they know so much about the disease (McNeill 2009)? An effect of the knowledge-through-experience theory is that, in daily life, one is dissuaded from judging what one does not know personally; this is presumably why Awenteerum took no offense when his son walked away from him to take a call. A thirty-year-old assemblyman named Akanang articulated the idea well, saying that the caller may have “urgent news. Since you don’t know, you can’t tell the person to get off the phone, and they can’t tell you to get off the phone.” Indeed, the main justification for interrupting someone’s conversation, as in the case of Avari, is the direct detection of a voice on the line that belongs to someone whose identity is suspect. That is, there had to be direct witnessing of some evidence before Avari could justifiably interrupt the phone conversations of his wife.

In short, the Balsa cultural assumption of knowledge-through-experience invites judgment when knowledge is certain. Since knowledge of who is “on the line” is almost never certain, talking on cell phones is rarely questioned, even if taking a call involves behaviors that, in the context of a face-to-face encounter, would be considered rude. This is how cell phones, especially their quality of hiding the identities of those on the other line, have helped create space for otherwise improper conduct. One takeaway from this is that it is simplistic to conceptualize the use of cell phones by Balsa as a matter of “using a new technology.” As soon as the “new” device ends up in the hands of even a single Balsa, the device has entered a world of relationships and meanings that situate the device within a particular cultural logic (Gershon & Bell 2013). It is just as simplistic, however, to conceive of Balsa as absorbing the cell phone unproblematically into their received cultural logic. Rather, the meeting of the cell phone and Balsa lifestyle is producing change, and this change is moving in a definite direction. The cell phone is striking the first blow, so to speak, by pulling Balsa’s conscious attention and body habits away from the face-to-face toward the disembodied, from material place toward immaterial space. The cell phone’s influence lies in its design and functions, which are obliging users to respond to them against the grain of face-to-face interactions. Balsa did not just choose but were “obliged to choose” the disembodied over embodied relationships.

All of the forty or so Balsa we interviewed saw cell phones as bringing change to Balsa life. A minority—usually middle-aged mothers from the subsistence part of society—viewed the change negatively, intimating that the devices were eroding known forms of social interaction and respect. However, most Balsa viewed the change positively, expressing appreciation for the ability to keep up relations with distant loved ones. Many also appreciated that cell phones helped to keep illicit relationships secret and made it possible to communicate in private with business partners and friends. In the context of this article and its argument, however, these diverse opinions are perhaps less interesting than the bodily responses we observed, which had some notably uniform characteristics. It is at the level of body conduct that the alienating effect of cell phone use is expressed palpably

and regularly. Paying attention only or even mostly to deliberate expression would obscure this fact, not least of all because we found only two Bursa who reflected on the impact of the devices on bodily conduct. Both commented on how some Bursa cell phone users, as one of the interviewees put it, motion with so much animation that they seem to want to “jump through the phone.” If there is a significant change coming from cell phone use in Buluk, it is at the level of bodies, feelings, and perceptions—all the more significant because of their being relatively out of site.

It is too early to tell what long-term positive or negative effects this change will have on Bursa relationships and society, much less to sound the bells of hope or alarm. What is clear is that, unlike what has been found in parts of Papua New Guinea (Lipset 2013), the use of cell phones is implicated in a definite trend toward desensitizing Bursa to interpersonal obligations and making them more receptive to egocentric forms of thought and action. For those who may praise the trend as a move toward greater individual freedom and choice, it will have to be accepted that this is a peculiar form of freedom rooted in a Cartesian distinction between a living mind and an inert body. The ringing of the cell phone prompts the call's recipient to retreat from an embodied conversation in favor of disembodied cell phone communication, which forces the self into a posture of intense mental activity and radical bodily absence. Insofar as cell phone use is starting to draw perceived lines between bodies, it may be seen as fashioning the Cartesian subject out of Bursa individuals. Of course, Bursa themselves are cooperating in the process of compromising the integrity of face-to-face obligations.

Conclusion

The specific question framing this article asked how cell phones and Bursa from Ghana's Upper East Region relate to each other in quotidian situations. The question assumed that human beings do not have absolute control over how ICTs such as cell phones are used; rather, as soon as people start using the devices, the devices, like eyeglasses (Ihde 2002), “alter . . . the wearer's relationship with the world” (Miller 2011:220). The theory of affordances captures this idea well, positing that objects, whether natural or manufactured, invite human beings to consider a range of thoughts and behaviors based on how the qualities of the objects fit in to their personal and cultural frameworks. The study found that cell phones invite Bursa to make a choice between attending to virtual or face-to-face conversations and relationships. Rather than offering a free choice of the alternatives, however, cell phones stack the deck, so to speak, in favor of the virtual. This obtains in part because the cell phones, in their ringing, functions, and presence, are the ones calling, literally and figuratively, for the choice to be made. Bursa users in our study nearly always acceded to the call over their face-to-face interactions. Whereas Bursa would generally castigate an individual for physically interrupting such interactions, they make excuses for similar

cell phone intrusions based on the cultural idea that the caller, being unknown to all but the call recipient, may have urgent news and should therefore not be ignored.

Although it is tempting to conclude, as others do in different contexts (e.g., Lipset 2013), that Balsa are domesticating ICTs such as cell phones to their own African cultural values and lifeways, the study finds that this is ultimately a simplistic conclusion. “Domestication” implies a one-way direction from foreign object to host setting, whereas, in the case of cell phones and Balsa, influence is moving both ways. Evidence for the two-way dynamic was most visible in the observed body habits of Balsa users. The prioritization of the virtual over the actual depends, first of all, on retraining oneself to maneuver the body out of direct physical contact in order to attend to those who live at a distance. Thus the ringing, vibrating phone, and even its mere presence, prompts Balsa to fidget, pivot, gesture, and swivel away from face-to-face interactions. This turning away in effect mediates the trajectory from the actual to the virtual; it is the sensual ground upon which a change in Balsa perception is grafted. Specifically, cell phones are inviting a change toward a Cartesian experience of self, defined by hyper-mental activity and a radical bodily absence. Although Balsa we interviewed did not fully accede to this changed experience of self, our observations confirmed the agency of cell phones in repeatedly pulling Balsa subjectivity into this posture, one call at a time.

The above analysis may shed some light on the more general question framing this article: How might an up-close study of the everyday interactions between Balsa and their ICTs challenge how scholars think about the empowering potential of ICTs in sub-Saharan Africa? Close observation of the moment-by-moment, embodied use of cell phones showed that keeping instantly in touch with faraway others depends on intensifying alienation in face-to-face relationships. This observation leads to more specific questions that are deserving of further study. For example, do Balsa use cell phones to better access the market and democratic processes? And if cell phones do make this contribution, does better access lead to personal and social development? Further, if future studies of ICTs in sub-Saharan Africa confirm this dynamic of cell phone use, is it empirically valid to refer to progress toward the market and a democratization that is premised on human alienation as “empowerment”? Ironically, most Balsa do not seem to mind, reminding us of Walter Benjamin’s words about the state of humankind a century ago: “Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order” (2007 [1968]:242).

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Blignaut (2009); Jiyane and Mostert (2010); Rheingold (2008). Some exceptions are Bruijn et al. (2009); Ekine (2010); Molony (2008); Overå (2008); Yoon (2003).
2. Grammatically, "Bulsa" is plural for the singular "Bula," although Bulsa rarely use the singular form. A Bulsa individual will usually say "I am Bulsa," not "I am Bula." Following common usage, we use "Bulsa" for both singular and plural.
3. Atuick was born and raised in Buluk and continues to live there; Watson is an American married to a Bulsa woman, Sadia Akambasi-Watson. These connections to Buluk, in addition to Atuick's fluency in the Bulsa language (Buli), helped to speed up the process of establishing trusted relationships with Bulsa participating in the study. Sadia Akambasi-Watson was particularly helpful in eliciting the views of women in the study.
4. For the sake of anonymity, pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of Bulsa participating in the study. Since Bulsa use the letter and sound of *A* at the start of all names, the pseudonyms reflect this practice.