

**Workshop ‘Mobile telephony in Africa: daily lives and societal debates’,
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In Africa, the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – the Internet and mobile telephony in particular – has accelerated remarkably since these were introduced in the late 1990s. This explosion of the Internet and mobile telephony on the African continent is oftentimes portrayed as a straightforward economic success and an opportunity for marginalized areas to overcome their assumed isolation. In the development discourse the new ICT are unequivocally regarded as a means for ‘development’. There are problems still; the ‘digital divide’ and the ‘technology gap’ threaten to slacken the process of Africa’s inclusion as active participants in the global village. Yet, these problems are interpreted only in terms of inclusion and problems of access. Within development circles the aim is to capacitate people (especially disadvantaged groups) so that they can afford these technologies and are no longer blocked from usage. The relation between development and communication technologies as such is not questioned.

This view has been criticized by a number of scholars. For these scholars the new ICT are a hegemonising force comparable to a new form of imperialism and neo-colonial control. Introduced by Western companies, these new technologies merely serve to bring Africa more firmly into the orbit of worldwide neo-capitalism. The new technologies are based on illegal coltan-mining, pushed onto African customers with misleading and aggressive advertisement campaigns, undermining local traditions of face-to-face communication, and, on top, old models from the West are dumped on the African continent, adding to the problem of pollution.

These notions about the dis/advantages of modern communication technologies are hardly based in empirical research and furthermore, they are largely framed in a macro-perspective on society. In our research programme on social relations, mobility and new communication technologies in Africa we seek to address the issue of development and communication technologies through the interpretation of African end-users. Instead of the macro-perspective we propose to deal with large structures and big issues from a bottom-up perspective: the daily lives of people and their evaluations of new technologies are central to our endeavour. Combining historical and anthropological methods we hope to address how people in Africa are appropriating new ICTs and how they did so in the past. Such an approach may redirect the debates mentioned above towards more emphasis on agency in historically specific contexts.