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3:00 PM

Luddy Hall, Rm. 1106

Appropriating Mobiles: How to Design African Nigerian Mobile Phones

Abstract: Mobile communications systems are among the most successful technologies on the planet. Their development, uptake and distribution have proceeded, perhaps faster than any other technology with global reach. Not only have mobile communications been successful virtually everywhere, but standardization has led to wide scale interoperability and attendant economies of scale. Nevertheless, upon careful inspection, unique dimensions of the mobile telephone phenomenon can be observed in individual nation-states. Culture, national politics, geography, available infrastructure all contribute in shaping the mobile network. Thus Ito (2005) can argue convincingly that the Japanese *keitai* is a different sociocultural object from the *cellular phone* in the US or the *mobile* in the UK. However, is local specificity a matter only of culture and practice? How different really are mobile networks from each other? When these sociotechnical systems travel and are adopted by varied societies and institutions, what changes and what stays the same?

Presenting a case study of the Nigerian adoption of mobile communications, this talk examines the mutual production of communications technology and social order in contemporary Nigeria. What insights for engineering future global communications systems can be drawn from studying mobile phone technologies? What can be learned by attending to the emergent nature of local practices around mobile phones and what are the implications for engineering design, regulatory practices and policy making?

Short Bio: Tolu Odumosu is an STS scholar who studies technological systems as historically and culturally situated socio-technical systems. Odumosu's first book, "Cycles of Invention and Discovery" (Harvard University Press, October 2016) examines the Science and Technology enterprise in the United States and shows how standardized categories of "basic" and "applied" research have become a hindrance. The book grew out of his examination of research cultures at Bell Laboratories while working on telecommunication systems and communication standards in Africa and the United States. He is currently working on a monograph of mobile telephony systems in Nigeria showing how their design and consequent development reflect the contingencies of Nigerian engineers and the practices of their users. He is also building the Digital Privacy Research Laboratory at the School of Engineering and Applied Science at the University of Virginia.

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