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Book Review

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The multi-author work *The Global Smartphone* is one of the first comparative ethnographic projects to examine smartphone adoption and usage amongst older persons. The merit of this work lies in its shift in focus away from the conventional young, often referred to as digital nomads, to older populations and their engagement with the smartphone. Eleven anthropologists focusing on research sites across Brazil, Ireland, Al-Quds, Uganda, Japan, Italy, Chile, China, Trinidad and Cameroon unravel what smartphones mean for older people and what its consequences are for the everyday lives of older persons. Adopting the perspective of “smart from below” (5) the authors depart from an understanding of smartphones as smart, intelligent devices that can adapt to their user through autonomous learning, but rather argue that it is the users who, with their ingenuity and craftsmanship, transform the smartphone into “an extraordinarily intimate and personal tool” (5), thereby, privileging people over devices.

The book is organized into nine chapters with the first and the last offering an introductory overview and theoretical reflections respectively. The remaining chapters draw on themes linked to smartphone usage among older persons that emerged from the ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the eleven anthropologists involved in this study. Chapter 2 unpacks “what people say about smartphones” by mapping the varied discourses that smartphones generate in various ethnographic sites. The authors remind that these discourses are operating across scales, from the macro level (e.g., in the media, state policies, market) to the everyday micro level (amongst smartphone users) and as such shape people’s ambivalent and contradictory understandings of smartphones as both harmful and useful. Thus, older persons in Uganda convey resentment against this material device by expressing discontent with younger generation’s disregard for conventional wisdom. Similarly, in Italy, older persons perceive youngsters as becoming ‘slaves’ to the ‘device.’ For Chinese users, on the other hand, smartphones encourage good citizenship practices and support the state’s path to digital modernity.

Chapter 3 examines smartphones as material objects. It shows how smartphones’ tangibility may be appropriated by users to convey class, status, gender and fashion. For example, phone screen wallpapers, phone cases, and covers are carefully chosen to convey personal aesthetics and communicate a sense of self as playful, flamboyant, or serious. On the other hand—and particularly relevant when considering an aging population—the materiality of a device can also introduce

challenges in terms of accessibility. Chapter 4 shifts the focus away from the exteriority of the device to the many mobile applications (popularly called apps) that it has. Using the concept of “scalable solutionism,” (86) the authors argue that people using smartphones are not oriented to apps but to tasks, and often creatively combine apps to get tasks accomplished. This is evidenced strongly in the use of smartphones for health. In this case, smartphone usage is not just restricted to the use of apps but also involves sending mobile money, voice calling solely for health purposes and constant checking-in on those who need care. These behaviours are not just evidence of ‘smart from below’ but equally challenge the idea that dotcom technologies fuel individualism and weaken social ties; here we see how care at a distance is facilitated by the multiple ways smartphones are deployed.

Building on James Everett Katz and Mark Akhus’ (2002) idea of “perpetual contact,” (104) Chapter 5 argues that smartphones facilitate “perpetual opportunism” (103). The authors contend that because the smartphone is always within reach, it creates possibilities of being constantly opportunistic. This is reflected in opportunistic photography, (over)consumption of news, information, and entertainment and in the expanded sociability through travel facilitated by transport and travel-related apps like Uber, Google Maps, Baidu, TripAdvisor etc. The authors note that this opportunism is also experienced differently by smartphone users across various field sites. For example, while middle class people in Ireland routinely use a configuration of apps to plan regular UK travel and feel secure using GPS as it reduces their chances of becoming lost in unfamiliar terrains, older people in Santiago are reluctant to use GPS out of fear of their location being tracked but do use apps to reduce waiting time for bus arrival. Additionally, perpetual opportunism also brings new vulnerabilities and anxieties, caused by ‘being available’ constantly for others who are just a device away.

Chapter 6, “Crafting,” refers to the “way in which people align their smartphone with individual, social and community life” (135). Crafting here does not convey a sense of unhindered agency but is always grounded in context, usage and cultural values as different case studies and anecdotal evidence establish. For example, the predominance of ‘family groups’ on the LINE app amongst Japanese users reflects the importance of the patriarchal family within Japanese domesticity and society. Similarly, in Dar al-Hawa, the majority of Muslims use an app that reminds them five times per day to pray on time. Chapter 7 explores the relationship between smartphone usage and age. It shows how older adults initially struggle to use the smartphone, due to the complex interface and younger generations’ impatience with teaching older persons to use the device. However, the authors argue, as older adults learn to use their smartphone, it not only provides them with new capabilities, but also makes them ‘feel younger’ through association with a youthful technology. This chapter for me reinforces the ideas of ‘successful aging’ and ‘smart aging’ which have dominated both the popular, academic and policy discourses in the last few decades (Lamb 2017; Sun *et al.* 2016). However, adoption of smartphones is not without challenges associated with old age particularly associated with frailty and dexterity. The ethnographic evidence presented in this chapter makes visible older adults’ constant contestation around the debilitating decline that aging is associated with, and the eagerness to ‘manage’ that decline and make it meaningful, through immediate connection with the contemporary world, facilitated by their engagement with smartphones.

Chapter 8 engages with the use of social media apps like LINE, WeChat and WhatsApp to show how they augment people’s ability to connect with families and communities. Most notable in this chapter is the conclusion that these platforms have consequences for people’s ability to exhibit and extend care to others through audio-visual materials such as voice notes, emojis, memes, stickers and web-cam calling. These, the authors argue, are perceived as making care at a distance “warmer” (185) for their respondents. These findings differ from those in Mirca Madinou’s (2012) study of transnational mothering, where the respondents argued that caring at a distance via technologies is ‘cold’ in

comparison to the ‘warmth’ of physically proximate care. Given these differences, it may be interesting to probe under what conditions care that is digitally mediated comes to be constituted as ‘cold’ or ‘warm.’ Is the everydayness of routine care different from extraordinary contingencies of life; whether (or not) these have a bearing on the meanings proximate in-person care or non-proximate distant care via technologies gets imbued with?

The final chapter summarizes key arguments in the book. For example, with the concept of “transportal home,” the authors make a case for viewing smartphones not simply as devices but as homes through which people who are living in times of increased mobility and instability, can ‘feel at home.’ In this concluding chapter the authors also argue that the smartphone has moved “beyond anthropomorphism” because even as this technology, unlike the robots, “does not look one iota like a human being” (228) it complements human capacities such as cognitive functions—e.g., by complementing or substituting the human memory—and through its ability to drastically change our mundane practices. Finally, the smartphone, as argued in the book, is a “relational smartphone” as it is not just a means of communication but also constitutes relationships, groups, and networks. This relational smartphone comes with its own set of ambivalences, as it is both a technology of care as well as of surveillance.

While *The Global Smartphone* discusses a wide range of issues on the intersection of the usage of smartphones and older persons, it would have been nice to read a bit about how older adults’ familiarity with other technologies, such as computers, relates to their adoption of smartphones. As the group of older persons that served as informants for this study was highly diverse across age, region, and class location, understanding their sense of familiarity with other technologies in relation to these broader categories would have helped ground the findings further.

In the end I only have praise for *The Global Smartphone* that for me is an apt representation of what a multi-author work looks like. The term “multi-author work” has been applied previously by Alpa Shah and colleagues (2018) to refer to their book *Ground Down by Growth* to recognise research that is collectively prepared and executed in multiple sites and eventually brought out as a single book with all researchers listed as authors. There is, however a fundamental difference with *The Global Smartphone* in the way the authors collaborated in the analytical labour of composing the book’s content. *Ground Down by Growth* is still organised pretty much like an edited volume, with an overarching introduction (and conclusion) by Alpa Shah and Jens Lerch, followed by individual chapters from five other contributing authors who worked as researchers in different field sites. *The Global Smartphone* is in that sense a much better example of how multi-author work needs to be executed: it is not composed of chapters by individual authors but is the result of a truly collaborative exercise of organizing material around focal themes as they reflect, overlap and sometimes diverge across sites while being constantly attentive to cultural differences. The team of authors in *The Global Smartphone* did not become contributors of specific chapters based on their ethnographic sites but essentially contributed to all chapters and to the book as whole, as was the case in the publication of Daniel Miller and his team’s other project on *How the World Changed Social Media* (2016).

Laced with ethnographic vignettes, images and screenshots of devices, and infographics of smartphone usage across sites and written in a highly accessible language devoid of heavy academic jargon, *The Global Smartphone* makes for an interesting read. This book offers a much needed contribution to the literature on smartphone adoption amongst older populations. It will be of interest to scholars working in the field of aging and gerontology, elder care, social change, media and communication. Being published open access will ensure its reach to a wider audience.

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