

THE Mobile Media Reader



edited by **Noah Arceneaux
& Anandam Kavoori**



Introduction: Mapping Mobile Media

NOAH ARCENEUX & ANANDAM KAVOORI

In all these years that I've been carrying it and reading it every day, I got so caught up in keeping it safe that I forgot to live by what I learnt from it.

—*THE BOOK OF ELI* (WARNER BROTHERS, 2010)

Denzel Washington—who plays the central character in *The Book of Eli*—is a study in mobility—physically moving with assured grit through a post-apocalyptic terrain, driven in equal part by theological certainty and human will. Politically, the media he carries (a Bible) can move nations and people. As the villain (Carnegie) in the film puts it, “It’s not a book, it’s a weapon...people will come from all over, they’ll do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book...all we need is the book.” But above all, it is the book’s religious mobility—its ability to create and carry a portable liturgy, a religious sensibility and indeed a fully assembled world view that is the *leitmotif* of the entire film—and of Eli’s life journey.

We begin with this (extended) popular culture reference to suggest that while some specific forms of mobile media may be “new,” the general concept itself is not. Mobile media are at least as old as the surfaces (stone, papyrus, metal) that allowed a story to be carried, and begins even earlier with oral culture—a system of mobility that, for example, allowed the *Rigveda* (a Hindu epic) to be passed on by word of mouth for at least two thousand years before it was formalized into text. This is also the intent and scope of this volume, which has a number of threads running

through it—the most important of which is a much-needed historicization of mobile media.

The current hype and hyperbole associated with mobile technologies threatens to overwhelm serious insight into the phenomenon, as relentless advertisements tout the lightning-fast speeds of various networks, the benefits of staying in touch with loved ones, and (somewhat comically) the ability to watch wide-screen, high-definition movies on miniaturized screens. The commercial media industries have seized upon this platform, revamping existing content for the particular demands of phones or creating entirely new forms. While many media industries established long ago suffer from declining audiences and dwindling advertising rates (most notably print media), there is something of a mania for “apps,” and mobile media, which derives from all previous forms, shows potential for even more significant growth. Such aggressively optimistic and even utopian hopes recall similar claims made about earlier electronic technologies, dating back to the telegraph. Without entirely rejecting such claims, and without neglecting some of the bona fide benefits of portable phones, this collection encourages readers to evaluate the phenomenon of mobile media within a broader, critical context.

This book had its beginnings in *The Cell Phone Reader: Essays in Social Transformation*, a 2006 anthology that sought to theorize a new medium. The earlier book brought together essays that theorized cell phones in a variety of ways—as a symbolic network, as an artifact of popular culture, as an agent of the public sphere and so forth—along with an understanding of the cell phone across a range of contexts and media/national cultures. This edited collection draws on some of the themes of *The Cell Phone Reader* but is made up of an entirely new set of essays—and for the most part by new contributors.

Given the dramatic changes associated with mobile technology in the intervening years, we realized that the earlier collection could benefit from an update. At the time of the original inception of *The Cell Phone Reader*, the academic study of cell phones was in a relatively early stage, though subsequent years have seen no shortage of monographs, anthologies, and journal articles that analyze the social and cultural implications of these devices. Technological innovation has proceeded at perhaps an even more rapid rate, and as previously noted, these devices are no longer limited to voice and text communication and are quite literally portable, multi-media centers that fit neatly into one’s pocket.

While many of the observations and insights from *The Cell Phone Reader* remain relevant, so many features have been incorporated into phones that the word “phone” itself feels quaint and outdated. As we contemplated the various issues and concerns raised by the growth of mobile media, we realized that an entirely new anthology was in order. Due to the real-world parameters of the publishing process,

there will likely be significant developments related to mobile media that will occur in the period between the writing of these essays and the final publication. As with our earlier collection, though, we believe that the essays will remain relevant for years to come, and offer enduring insights.

This new anthology is justified not only because of technological developments, but because the varied uses of mobile communication devices present an array of topics for intellectual interrogation. Working from the premise that technologies are inherently cultural objects, and not just combinations of micro-circuitry and cutting-edge software, the essays in this anthology explore the negotiations between industries that inform and shape the content that is delivered to mobile devices. Another recurring theme is the importance of cultural perceptions; the ways in which new technologies are conceptualized and imagined can influence their evolution just as much as anything from the realms of technology or engineering. These cultural critiques are infused with empirical, real-world evidence, thus providing readers with information about what has happened in the past and the current status of various technologies. Our hope is that along with factual knowledge about mobile media, readers will find suggestions as to how to comprehend and understand this latest evolution in communications technology.

We have been guided by three maxims in our choice of essays—*historicize*, *contextualize* and *diversify*. The first refers to understanding mobile media in both its historical context and historicizing contemporary mobile media; the second to finding frames of reference that draw on a number of intellectual traditions, so that the study of mobile media itself matures—and finally, diversify refers to the range of topic areas (outside the usual ambit of technology or usage) that a complete study of mobile media should aspire to. In what follows, we will map some of the themes/subjects of the individual chapters as they relate to these maxims. Needless to add any one volume on this subject can scarcely do complete justice to the mass of technologies that makes up “mobile media” today. Our goal has been to cover as many topics as possible, drawing from a variety of academic approaches, though there are undoubtedly aspects of the phenomenon that we have omitted.

The first section of the book, “Foundations,” provides, as the title suggests, a foundation for thinking about mobile media today. Taken together the five essays in this section historicize, contextualize and diversify our thinking about mobile media by taking a relatively circumscribed area of analysis (location-aware technologies; cinematic representations; postwar audio radio; citizens band radio; and spectrum allocation) and connecting them with wider institutional/technological and sociological elements in play.

Jason Farman (“Historicizing Mobile Media: Locating the Transformations of Embodied Space”) explores the tensions around the growth of location-aware

technologies by looking at earlier forms of mobile media. Early in his essay he sets the terms for understanding mobile media that apply to all the chapters that follow and are worth repeating in this introduction: “The historical blind spots in our contemporary imaginings of mobile media come out of a tradition of technological determinism...and while it is true that technologies shape and transform our lives to some extent, this perspective tends to ignore the cultural and historical forces that were responsible for the emergence of a particular technology.” In that spirit, this book (like its predecessor) *centers technology as a cultural form*—or what Peter Brosius, an anthropologist at the University of Georgia, calls “technologies of visualization”: media forms that *make concrete* the ceaseless flow of culture(s) in post-industrial society. Farman focuses on a common denominator of mobile media—how our uses of technologies transform our relationships to social space. Drawing on historical examples (papyrus, the printing press, clocks, and contemporary media), he suggests specific tensions between notions of proximity/intimacy and notions of distance/otherness that exist in the cultural transformations that accompany the expansion of mobile technologies.

Scott W. Ruston (“Calling Ahead: Cinematic Imaginations of Mobile Media’s Critical Affordances”) suggests that mobile media exhibits a unique combination of *affordances* which include “ubiquity”—the quality of being always in our presence, always in our possession, and always connected to a larger mediascape; “portability”—the ability to take a device with us wherever we go; “personality”—which encapsulates individuality and bodily materiality (the concept extends beyond the mere customization to an overall cyborgian quality of an extension of the self and body); “connectivity”—the technological and social sense of human interaction and engagement; and finally, “locativity”—the capacity of the mobile phone to be out in space, unbound from a fixed location, unlike the television and cinematic experience, and make a relevant association between media content and place for the user. He then examines cultural locations where such affordances can be observed and finds them in what he calls “the cultural imaginary”—the complex set of media images that come to us from cinema, television, and new media. Focusing on television advertising, Ruston provides a methodological template for thinking through the complex chains of media and cultural connectivity that make up the representation and use of mobile media.

Matthew Killmeier (“Analog Analogue: U.S. Automotive Radio as Mobile Medium”) explores the history of postwar U.S. automotive radio. He identifies the unifying and segmenting social forces that shaped automotive radio along with dialectically intertwined centrifugal and centripetal tendencies. He offers a general theoretical template for understanding contemporary mobile media: they build upon existing communications linkages, but over time reconfigure them as new com-

munications exchanges; successful mobile content complements the particular characteristics of the mobile medium's development and cultural usage; mobile media are characterized by mobile privatization, mutually constitutive with segmentation and increasing everyday and aggregate mobility; and finally, there is a homologous, mutually constitutive relationship between mobile media form and content. He argues that in order to comprehend form and content, we have to understand the medium as a cultural form—and further, while cultural form encompasses a particular medium with technological features, it extends *beyond* the medium and its political-economic contextual framework to privilege social practices and signification.

Noah Arceneaux (“CB Radio: Mobile Social Networking in the 1970s”) takes a serious look at one of the most popular fads of that decade, citizens band radio. The technology had existed for some time, though a combination of factors catapulted this form of communication into the mainstream in the early 1970s and drivers of every persuasion, not simply truck drivers, added them to their dashboards. By analyzing popular representations of citizens band, including depictions in films and country songs, Arceneaux identifies some themes that continue to be associated with mobile communication. CB radio was, for example, seen as somewhat rebellious, unruly technology that allowed drivers to evade authorities; today, mobile communication is also seen as something that is difficult to control.

Thomas Hazlett's chapter (“A Brief History of U.S. Mobile Spectrum”) is a departure from other essays in this collection in its relative narrow focus on the connections between technology, institutional developments, public policy prescriptives and marketplace dynamics in the development of what he calls the “mobile spectrum.” While some savvy consumers are aware of the importance of spectrum allocation, many have no knowledge of this pivotal issue that underlies mobile communication. Decisions about which companies have access to the airwaves, and how much they might utilize, exert significant influence upon the services that are available. Hazlett provides a historical tracking of the various factors that determine spectrum allocation and makes a compelling argument: “The history of mobile services in the U.S. reflects a distinct pattern. Long delays block economic development; when the bottleneck loosens, permitting dollops of new bandwidth to go to entrepreneurs, frenetic economic activity ensues—new services arise, prices fall, and mobile use skyrockets.” This dynamic conforms to the longer history of spectrum allocation, as engineers and technicians continually seek to maximize the number of messages that can be carried over particular frequencies.

The second section of the book, “Forms/Functions,” reiterates the broad themes of the book—historicize, contextualize and diversify—through seven essays that address specific forms of mobile content and ways in which they are utilized: mobile video, the growth of e-readers, journalism, gaming, ringtones, ethnic iden-