

• *Book Reviews* •

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**Mobile Communication.** Ling, Rich and Jonathan Donner. [Digital Media and Society Series.] (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009. 156, notes and references).

With the ubiquity of mobile communications technology around the world has come the emergence of cultural phenomena rich in economic, political, and social significance. This is the primary point of Rich Ling and Jonathan Donner's contribution to the ongoing Digital Media and Society Series of compact yet highly useful volumes, and the primary reason that folklorists should invest themselves in reading the book. For, within the technological and cultural matrix of mobile communication outlined by the authors, folklorists will recognize the dynamic creation of everyday practice that anchors notions of tradition and community via forces of continuity and change.

The book foregrounds the technological history of cellular communication, grounding the now pervasive mobile handset in a surprisingly long arc of innovation, governmental policy, corporate strategy, and individual use. Ultimately, it is that level of individual use and situated culturally-grounded behavior that might catch the attention of a folklorist, but the succinct yet detailed history provided by Ling and Donner contextualizes the environment within which both larger cultural patterns and more localized traditions crystallize around mobile phones.

Everyday life is a central trope in this book, and represents one of the more immediate points of contact with folklore. An emphasis on the quotidian also helps frame the question: why should folklorists care about mobile phones? The general answer provided by this volume is: because they are such prominent factors in everyday life. More specific answers to the question, however, should emerge from folkloristic fieldwork and inquiry into how people envelope, rely on, repurpose, or otherwise engage mobile telephony in the daily cultural and social settings they inhabit—perhaps a new direction in folklore, and one resonant with the authors' central arguments about the spread of mobile communication.

In the middle third of the book, the authors present a series of vignettes depicting the varied and dynamic ways in which people utilize mobile phones across diverse contexts. These vignettes provide illustrative details for their arguments, but also can serve as glimpses for folklorists into the kind of fieldwork scenarios we are likely to encounter—or have already encountered—in the increasingly mobile world. Set in India, Japan, Norway, Italy, Chile, Rwanda, China, Singapore, and the United States, the vignettes depict cultural and social forces of interest to folklorists: movement between urban and rural; creative appropriation of technology; community dynamics; cultural entrepreneurship; the integration of old and new into daily life. While these vignettes are compelling and rich with cultural detail, it is important to note a few things about them. First, the authors readily reveal that some of the portraits of “individual” mobile users are more accurately described as collages of details culled from research in a particular place. That is, they represent “common” or generalizable users rather than specific people. Second, while the vignettes as a whole reside in interview and observation-based fieldwork redolent of that done by folklorists, the more direct interest they hold for folklorists comes from the questions they push us to ask. How do mobile communications fit into local patterns of communication? In what ways do cell phones impact cultural performance? What are the relationships between mobile communications and emergent patterns of cultural practice? This list is partial, of course, but points toward the potential approaches folklorists might take when conducting fieldwork that attends—even indirectly—to the prominence of mobile communication technology and use around the globe.

In the last two chapters of the book Ling and Donner move toward analysis of key debates and issues brought about by the rise of mobile communications. The penultimate chapter on debates over mobile communications helps to situate mobile phones in relation to the realms of policy, commerce, and technological infrastructure, thereby connecting the cultural patterns seen in the vignettes to politics and economics at the state and global level. The final chapter, however,

moves closer to folklore territory by establishing a few key concepts by way of a conclusion. In revisiting the notion of “ubiquity” that has driven much of their discussion, Ling and Donner articulate key ways in which mobile communication represents radical departure from traditional landline communication—and these distinctions have relevance to folklorists with regards to both research practice and focus.

First, they note that mobile ubiquity has led to “individual addressability,” meaning that, more often than not, we are placing phone calls to people rather than to places. That is, it is no longer feasible to rely on the assumption that when someone answers the phone they will be standing in the place we expect them to be in; the implications for fieldwork practice are many, especially given the reach of mobile communications demonstrated by Ling and Donner throughout the book. From coordinating interviews to navigating field sites, the mobile paradigm will have impact on how folklorists conduct research. It will also have impact on what we research, as notions of place and rootedness of technology shift in relation to emergent cultural practices flowing in and around mobile communication.

This dynamic relationship of technology and everyday behavior is essentially the second important point that the authors make in their conclusion, as they note that ubiquity also means “we can interlace our communication activities more finely into the fabric of our everyday interaction in a way that was not previously possible” (135). This statement also carries implications for both folklore fieldwork practice and research topics, and it is worthwhile for folklorists to take these implications seriously, approaching the “mobile logic” cogently discussed by Ling and Donner throughout this book as a cultural formation that impacts how we do the work of folklore but also provides rich material for doing that work.

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