



# The Great GSM (cell phone) Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business and the State in Nigeria

Ebenezer Obadare

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# The Great GSM Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business and the State in Nigeria

**Ebenezer Obadare**

## **Abstract**

On September 19 2003, following weeks of concerted mobilisation, mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria took the unprecedented step of switching off their handsets *en masse*. The consumers took this symbolic measure in protest against perceived exploitation by the existing GSM phone companies- Zimbabwean-owned Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited, the South-African-owned MTN Limited, and the Nigerian state-owned NITEL. Among other things, they were angered by allegedly exorbitant tariffs, poor reception, frequent and unfavourable changes in contract terms, poor access, and arbitrary reduction of credits. This event, which went virtually unreported in the Western media, has continued to generate ripples in the wider social pool in the country. At issue is a series of critical questions which the protest helps bring into focus- how useful or reliable is technology as an instrument of social activism? How is (mobile) technology shaping the democratic momentum in Nigeria, and indeed the rest of the African continent? And perhaps most important, how useful is technology as a mechanism for the socio-economic empowerment of ordinary citizens? Using the boycott and the attendant fallouts as empirical context, this study provides a number of tentative answers. It argues that '9/19' (as it was popularly called in the print and broadcast media) ought to be appraised, first, in the context of existing mistrust between customers and transnational big business in Nigeria as evidenced by the conflict in the southern oil producing areas; and second, against the background of difficult state-society intercourse which has mostly been characterised by the latter's suspicion of the state's connivance with the corporate establishment. Furthermore, the paper argues that because it gives civil society a combined *cause* and *instrument* of protest, mobile phones in the Nigerian context presage the emergence of a new social *space* of politics and agitation. The paper concludes with a number of deductions which call for a rethinking of the scholarly paradigm on the interface between technology, citizen action and social activism.

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# The Great GSM Boycott: Civil Society, Big Business and the State in Nigeria

Ebenezer Obadare

## INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Let me begin with some preliminary remarks about the background and motivation for this study. These remarks will centre on the choice of the subject matter, in this case mobile telephony in Nigeria. Given that the study establishes a conceptual relationship between mobile telephony and contemporary civil society in Nigeria, it is important to explain why civil society, and why mobile telephony, and why the two together? A major aim of the study is to *show* civil society in action in with a view to examining the extent to which the picture that emerges either squares with or departs from the dominant contentions in the existing literature on the subject<sup>1</sup>. While scholarship on civil society in African societies brims with claims and counter-claims, comparatively little has been done by way of empirical work to substantiate or rebut this rash of claims.<sup>2</sup> The present study attempts to partly redress this situation by focusing critical gaze on what might be called *actually existing civil society*. That being the case, it appears that few social realities better exemplify civil society *live* than the boycott of mobile telephone services on Friday September 19 2003 by subscribers across the country- Nigeria. Although the boycott went largely unreported in the Western media, it remains, for many reasons, a watershed in the development of oppositional culture in the country, and some of these reasons are worth setting out at this juncture.

The first is the emergence in Nigeria of the use of modern technology as a tool for democratic activism and consolidation. Philosophically, the September 19 boycott consolidates on the democratic opposition's use of radio technology<sup>3</sup> to generally mobilise against military rule and, specifically, protest the annulment of the June 12 presidential election by the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. Yet, significant though it was, the deployment of Radio Kudirat International (RKI) for the means of political justice and anti-military liberalisation did not liberate the same kind of social energy, nor produce the same kind of social effect that the agitation surrounding the use of mobile telephones seems, at least potentially, capable of unleashing.

This brings me to the second reason why I think that the 9/19 (as it was called in the local press) ‘rebellion’ is significant- its embodying of a new imaginary of popular dissent, in particular the potential for the mobile telephone to open new vistas in ordinary citizens’ agitation for both economic and political self-determination in the country. What this means of course is that *while the boycott at issue was specifically targeted at the mobile telephone companies, it was at the same time more than that*. In a sense, the boycott itself encapsulates and caps existing feuds between the citizens-as-customers and business corporations in Nigeria (witness for example the yet unresolved saga in the oil ‘producing’ Niger Delta), and between the same citizens-as-consumers and the Nigerian state. Indeed, majority of consumers who took part in the protest saw it as a continuation of the larger project of righting the wrongs that many believe are integral to the very idea of the Nigerian state. The following statement by the Chairman of the Unofficial Consumers’ Protection Agency (UCPA), Ojemaye Otitoka<sup>4</sup> is an excellent illustration of this mentality: “This is the spirit of this campaign. This is the real force behind its eventual success, the spirit of the Nigerian people who are speaking up for themselves finally. *Now we are crying against exorbitant GSM tariffs. Tomorrow, using the same methods we will complain about other things.*”<sup>5</sup> (Emphases added).

Third, and a corollary to the foregoing, the public protest against the perceived corporate failings and excesses of the GSM phone companies signifies the emergence of a new outlet of *voice*,<sup>6</sup> and a new modality of engagement by civil society against the state. From the way ordinary subscribers enthused endlessly about the boycott, it was evident that they saw it as nothing less. Nevertheless, this is not to idealize the possibilities of (mobile) technology for democratic activism in Nigeria or generally, and we shall return to this disputed relationship later on in the paper. Be that as it may, mobile phones, compressors or nullifiers of *physical* space that they are, evidently presage the emergence of a new *social* space of politics and agitation, indeed a new sociality.

Finally, the 9/19 boycott and associated events furnish an appropriate context to problematise a whole series of interrelated issues. These include the imbrication of technology in specific socio-political contexts, the dynamics of civil society in action, the interface between civil society and the state, and between civil society and the corporate world. An added significance of this paper therefore lies in its transcending of the usual civil society-state bipolarity and aiming at a triangle of state-market-civil society which, we argue, provides deeper illumination.

To properly situate our analysis, we begin with a brief exploration of the relevant theoretical literature on the possibilities of technology for democratic activism. We follow this by providing some background information on the context of telecommunications in Nigerian political history, focusing on how it has been a contested site in the larger struggle between state and society in general. Thereafter, we outline the

GSM boycott of 19 September 2003 in Nigeria, focusing on the immediate background, the issues at stake, and the consequences thus far. The paper closes by analysing some implications of the boycott for civil society in Nigeria, the GSM companies, and the state. It also reflects on the consequences for theoretical understanding of the use of mobile technology for democratic activism.

## **TECHNOLOGY, THE STATE AND DEMOCRATIC ACTIVISM: A CONCEPTUAL SKETCH**

An in-depth theoretical analysis of how technology shapes society and vice versa is outside the purview of this study.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the aim in this section is to explore, albeit briefly, some of the nodes at which technology (telecommunications technology in general and mobile technology in particular) and society interface. While a number of relevant studies have attempted to do this especially in the context of the western world,<sup>8</sup> our analysis here focuses particularly on the utility of (telecommunications) technology for political and social change within the specific context of the geo-political South. Thus, while Nigeria is the main socio-geographic anchor for our analysis, it actually essentialises many of the patterns observable in similar social formations in the developing world.

Giving the preceding, one is virtually compelled to begin by admitting the existence of what is frequently described in the literature as a “digital divide”, by which is meant the huge gap in technological penetration of society between the global North and South, or more clearly between Western Europe and the United States, and the rest of the world. For Castells, the clearest marker of the difference that exists between the two digitally divided worlds may be that while one part may be appropriately described as comprising “informational societies”, the other part may not. “Informational societies”, he argues, are those “in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions emerging in this historical period” (Castells 2002:21). “Informational societies”, of course, are different from mere “information societies” in which “information, in its broadest sense, e.g. as communication of knowledge, (is) critical” (parenthesis added). If this social stratification is accepted- and we are convinced that it is valid to a considerable degree- it is obvious that most African countries easily fall under the latter rubric.

This conclusion is supported by pertinent statistics. For instance, according to the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Technology Achievement Index (TAI) which “aims to capture how well a country is creating and diffusing technology and building a human skill base-reflecting capacity to participate in the technological innovations of the network age” (UNDP 2001:46)<sup>9</sup>, most African and other developing countries are still at a rudimentary stage when it comes to using technology as a basis for

social development.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while the TAI index, using a number of set values ranks countries according to these categories: leaders (TAI above 0.5); potential leaders (0.35-0.49); dynamic adopters (0.20-0.34); or marginalized (above 0.5); Nigeria and a majority of African countries are grouped as 'others' having 'no value'.<sup>11</sup> This gloomy picture is corroborated by a recent study on "African Internet Usage and 2004 Population". According to the study, which recorded figures for 57 African countries, there are 10,075,200 (1.1 per cent) users in the continent's total population out of which 420,000 (0.3 per cent) are Nigerian users from the study's estimated population of 154,491,100." Though the most populous on the African continent with an estimated 150 million people, Nigeria is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> after South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Zimbabwe.<sup>12</sup> Overall, there is no African country whose Internet usage is up to seven per cent of the total population.

Several explanations can be made for this unflattering situation, a good number of them inevitably connected with the social environment in which African countries were inserted at the dawn of political independence. But we should be wary of flogging this explanation. What is equally true is that the nature of the struggle for political and social resources across the continent has necessitated a situation in which successive African leaders have regarded telecommunications technology with suspicion at best, and hostility at worst.

Two quick examples will suffice. At the height of the opposition to the regime of General Sani Abacha in 1996, the junta's National Security Adviser, Alhaji Ismaila Gwarzo, obviously worried by the rate at which knowledge of the Internet was spreading among the youthful segment of the Nigerian society, publicly contemplated banning the Internet or at least restricting popular access to it.<sup>13</sup> Second, one of the issues that has paradoxically put the matter of public access to affordable and reliable telecommunications on the front burner was the same regime's decision to make illegal the many telephone and related Information Technology (IT) centres which had mushroomed in different parts of the country. The General's action was widely interpreted as part of the attempt to asphyxiate civil society by denying it the critical oxygen of information and communication. In retrospect, this move may not have achieved the desired objective given the opposition's subsequent and relatively effective use of the Radio Kudirat International (RKI)<sup>14</sup> to campaign for the invalidation of the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election and the return of the country to democratic rule.

Technology, in particular telecommunications technology, is therefore central to state-society relations in Africa, and plays more than a determinant role in the perennial struggle for state power. It is therefore hardly coincidental that the introduction of mobile telephony in a country like Nigeria has come with the return to civil rule. The truth is that

military regimes, with their pathological obsession with dominating the public space, will never voluntarily cede its control to contrary social forces, which is what technological liberalisation is believed to be tantamount to. We will expatiate on this in the following section but it is important to note at this point that even though the policy foundation for GSM telephony was laid under the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida,<sup>15</sup> the dream was never realised until the return to civil rule in May 1999 partly because he (Babangida) saw telecommunications policy, indeed the domain of (tele)communications as an extension of his political vision, wherein every activity was tailored to suit his ambition of remaining in power *ad infinitum*.

In essence, and as amply illustrated by the foregoing, the state plays more than a provincial role in technology development in general, whether we are talking about its innovation, policy, or guidelines for its use. Castells has divided the impact of the state in relation to technology into two, what we might call, broadly, that of enhancement and stagnation. According to him, while

society does not determine technology, it can, *mainly through the state*, suffocate its development. Or alternatively, again *mainly by state intervention*, it can embark on an accelerated process of technological modernization able to change the fate of economies, military power, and social well-being in a few years. Indeed, the ability or inability of societies to master technology, and particularly technologies that are strategically decisive in each historical period, largely shapes their destiny, to the point where we could say that while technology *per se* does not determine historical evolution and social change, technology (or the lack of it) embodies the capacity of societies to transform themselves, as well as the uses to which societies, always in a conflictive process, decide to put their technological potential (Castells 2002:7) (Italics added).

His favourite example is China where developments seem to have confirmed the wisdom that

On the one hand, the state can be... a leading force for technological innovation; on the other hand, precisely because of this, when the state reverses its interest in technological development, or becomes unable to perform it under new conditions, a statist model of innovation leads to stagnation, because of the sterilization of society's autonomous innovative energy to create and apply technology...The same culture may induce very different technological trajectories depending on the pattern of relationships between state and society. However, the exclusive dependence on the state has a price, and the price for China was that of retardation, famine, epidemics, colonial domination, and civil war, until at least the middle of the twentieth century (Ibid:10).

A careful reading of Castells would suggest that the relationship between technology, the state and society is actually a dialectical one. While the state is wont to overdetermine the use of technology by society, society also uses technology to further its own ends, never mind that such may at times be fundamentally incompatible with the 'reason of state'. The result, for instance, is the use of telecommunications technology for various kinds of political agenda, ranging from the progressive, social justice, 'Seattle' type, to the activities of terrorists with one grudge or the other against the modern liberal state. Mastery and adept use of telecommunications technology, needless to say, was crucial to the attack on United States targets on 11 September 2001. Indeed, if scholars like Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001) are to be believed, a novel form of social organisation (after tribes, hierarchies and, markets) seems to have emerged around networks using sophisticated communication technologies and decentralized organisational structure. These 'smart mobs', to borrow Howard Rheingold's (2003) apt characterisation are "self-regulated through flat governance hierarchies and distributed power." (Ibid:163).

The surprise then, if we may call it that, is that the dialogue between technology and society is bound to result in unanticipated consequences. (Telecommunications) technology seems to be a neutral force that forces in society (civil or otherwise) can mobilise for different projects. Certainly, across contemporary Africa, telecommunications technology, most especially mobile technology, continues to establish a huge impact on the social landscape. To cite just two quick examples, mobile technology is believed to be helping Ugandan farmers deal with the vagaries of the market, while Congolese have apparently started talking to one another again after decades of bitter conflict, thanks to the introduction of mobile technology in the Congo Democratic Republic (*BBC Focus Magazine* January-March 2004). It remains a moot point whether the same technology will not be used to telling effect by combatants if there is a recurrence of conflict in the foreseeable future.

If the impact of technology on some aspects of social life is uncertain, the consequences for politics, especially democratic activism, are contested by scholars. Many scholars remain outright sceptical about the democratic utility of new technologies, particularly media technologies. For Ake (2000), the public sphere brought into being by information technologies has hardly any boundaries, is too fluid, and too amorphous to elicit a sense of sharing in a social entity or to nurture political projects and democratic activism. Kroker and Weinstein (2000) agree with him. They argue that the new information superhighway "kills human agency and renders economic justice, democratic discourse, social solidarity and creativity obsolete" (quoted in Adebaniwi 2001). A cursory look at the literature reveals that this kind of techno-scepticism has a long history and a somewhat distinguished philosophical pedigree. For example, members of the famous

Frankfurt School of social philosophical were almost unanimous on the limits of media technologies which they believed were controlled by capitalists (see Zoltan 1977).

Many other scholars do not share their pessimism. The philosophical core of the optimists' argument seems to have been captured in Rheingold's statement that "communities built inside machines or on air can be used to improve the ones outside of them" (2003). How this process takes place is of course the crux of the matter. Pertierra (2002) argues for example that mobile phones, through texting, have provided people with "more freedom to express themselves in a strictly defined cultural environment" (2002:8). For Finqualievich (2001), new media technologies undergird the emergent concept of electronic democracy, essentially "the increasing use of telecommunications technology to strengthen transparency, intra- and inter-organisational communication and public participation in governance" (see Kuvaja and Mursu 2003:18). According to him, electronic democracy transcends merely making information available on the net. Rather, it is about "changing management and organisation structures to enable citizens' participation and access to information" (ibid).

The optimists' argument has continued to garner considerable sympathy, especially as new media technologies continue to play an axial role in political transformations across the world, particularly in the developing world. The foremost example in this regard is the 'coup de text' which culminated in the ouster of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines in January 2001. While scholars generally disagree on the specific impact that "thumb tribes" (see Rheingold 2003) invoking the "power of the text" had on EDSA II,<sup>16</sup> there is no doubt that the more than 100 million texts that Filipinos exchanged daily (Agar 2003:109) were significant in the process of mobilisation against the presidency of Erap.<sup>17</sup> Although there are those who point out that EDSA II was ultimately not about people power but in reality a reflection of the middle class's influence and power of manipulation (see for example the brilliant discussion by Vicente Rafael (2003)), the incident occupies a pride of place in the optimist canon and is frequently cited as a crucial milestone in the use of technology for the purposes of social advocacy. More important, it has continued to inspire embattled and/or embittered groups elsewhere.

In the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott in Nigeria, it was common to hear aggrieved subscribers argue that "if it (switching off handsets to force the hands of phone companies) succeeded in Argentina and the Philippines, it will succeed in Nigeria." Although it may be argued that the immediate object of the protest in Nigeria differed in form from that in the Philippines (while one was about using the boycott to force the GSM companies to, among other things, reduce tariffs and provide better services, the other concerned using the mobile phone as a tool for political overhauling), the ends are actually similar to the extent that one locates the protest in Nigeria within the right political context. As we advanced earlier on, the GSM boycott was not about the GSM

companies alone but ultimately about the totality of the rest of society in relation to the Nigerian state and economy. We shall return to this hypothesis again at a later stage in the paper.

From the above, there is little doubt that recent developments offer a basis for a rethinking of the sceptics' position. Let us advance by asking a few questions: What does EDSA II in the Philippines really symbolise, how useful is telecommunications technology/mobile telephony for democratic activism, what sort of public sphere do new media technologies occasion, and how effective are they in contesting hegemony? Clearly, these dilemmas cannot be fully resolved within these pages, but we will advance a set of hypotheses which may guide further discussions. First, we hold that new technologies of communication, in particular mobile telephones, expand the existing territory of public expression. This expansion is important for African countries and the developing world where decades of autocracy have led to the progressive denudation of the public sphere. They thus energise civil society by critically complementing the raft of issues around which it has usually organised. In this wise, new media technologies generate a *reason* for as well as a *means* of social democratic activism.

How do they do this? Schmidtke (1998) has advanced four related theses on the relationship of new technologies to collective action and political mobilization. New technologies, according to him

1. Reduce costs for collective action;
2. Reduce individuals' costs for engagement and participation;
3. Intensify the actors' sense of engagement; and,
4. Facilitate the formation of collective identity.

While this may indeed be the case, it should be noted that how this plays out rests squarely on the immediate socio-political environment in which technology and society inter-course. As Schmidtke himself has warned, at the end of the day, it is not the medium, but the social and political context that determines the contours of subsequent events.

In the foregoing, we have tried to identify some of the issues in the conceptual literature on technology, state and society. The aim has been to place the discussion in this paper in as broad a scholastic spectrum as possible in order to help in grasping the wider ramifications of what is at issue, which is how modern telecommunications technology, in this case mobile telephony, is interfacing with democratic politics and citizen action in Nigeria in significant ways. The larger aim remains the same - to see how mobile telephony is instigating new forms of social action, embodying at the same time a new imaginary of civil society and public dissent. Before going to the boycott proper, we

should like to offer some background information about telephony and the state in Nigeria.

## **REGIMES OF JEALOUSY**

It is impossible to understand the travails of telephony in Nigeria outside the context of the overall insufficiency of the state with regard to the provision of public services. These include among others, roads, sanitation facilities, public space infrastructure and, most notoriously, electricity. Such is the general dereliction of the state with respect to the latter for instance that the general public would, in frustration, insist on calling the corporation responsible for the provision of electricity ‘Never Expect Power Always’ in contrast to the original ‘National Electric Power Authority’ (NEPA). A testimony to the public’s deep scepticism about the ability of NEPA to provide stable electricity is the prevalence of electricity generators in industries and upper middle class homes across the country. Nevertheless, the erratic nature of power supply to homes and industries has endured despite increased budgetary allocations to the sector over the years (see Olukoju 2004); and famously, despite the initiatives of several state governments, including the Lagos state government which embarked on an independent power supply scheme with the now bankrupt American energy company, Enron, in 2001 (Olukoju 2004).

The problem with a service like telephony however is that it is hardly amenable to private solutions mainly for reasons of cost, and also because the intervention of the state is required at different stages in the process. This necessity for state intervention has dawned even more powerfully in the aftermath of the introduction of GSM services in Nigeria, and we will shed more light on this connection presently.

The telephone has always been central to the projection of state power in Nigeria. Crucially, it has also been a strong element in social stratification as the possession of a telephone was supposed to be an index of where one belonged on the social ladder. According to a newspaper commentator, “in Nigeria, such amenities that have long been taken for granted as essential to modern living were preserved as status symbols. Public monopolies like NITEL (Nigerian Telecommunications Limited) were nursed at tax payers’ great expense in furtherance of the trend.”<sup>18</sup> This was arguably the subconscious background to the remark by Colonel David Mark, minister of communications under the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida that telephones are not for the poor. Earlier, we mentioned another illustration of this subconscious, namely the decision of the Abacha regime to ban the operations of telephone centres across the country. Given this situation, the question may be asked as to whether the failure of the Nigerian state to provide efficient telephony services is attributable to its familiar bureaucratic anaemia or, perhaps, a conscious policy to starve civil society of a vital source of energy.

Whether consciously or otherwise however, the reality is that prior to the introduction of GSM technology in the country in 2001, Nigeria was what might be called a virtual telecommunications desert. Relevant figures buttress this assertion. Pre-GSM, Nigeria ranked globally as the third lowest in teledensity (average number of telephones per thousand population) after Afghanistan and Mongolia (Oparah 2003). Although the first telephone call in the country was made in 1901, up till a century later in 2001, Nigeria, with a population of 88 million according to the disputed 1991 national population census, could only boast of 450,000 lines. A majority of these lines were provided by the state-owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) and a handful of private telecommunications operators (PTOs). Still, services were invariably abysmal, and the Nigerian public could not make up their minds on which was more inefficient- NEPA or NITEL? In addition, the ownership of the few existing lines lends credence to the point we made earlier about the telephone as a social delineator. The 450,000 odd lines were in the hands of less than 90,000 individuals and corporate organisations, many of which had more than 50 lines on their switch boards (Oparah 2003). Furthermore, as telephones were intimately connected to social standing, new lines were almost impossible to acquire. The waiting time for a new telephone line was somewhere between 8 and 10 years, while the cost (minus installation charges) was about N80, 000 (\$800). This, at a time when the average annual salary was less than N40, 000 (\$400).

Instructively however, the issue of telecommunications, particularly of telephones never disappeared from public discourse. Indeed, if anything, other developments in the larger society made its continuous debate imperative. One was the quantum leap in the number of citizens who were compelled by the prevailing economic situation to emigrate from the country. As this diaspora swelled, so did its needs, particularly those related to communication. This, among other factors connected with the impact of globalisation on the domestic economy served to put telecommunications issues on the front burner of public debate. As a result, successive governments felt compelled to pay lip service to the idea despite their apparent insincerity. Thus, a core component of President Ibrahim Babangida's otherwise garbled strategy of economic deregulation (Olukoshi 1993, Biersteker and Lewis 1996) was a national telecommunications policy. In actual fact, the decree regulating the activities of GSM companies was promulgated as far back as 1992.<sup>19</sup> However, as pointed out before, the policy could not come to fruition partly due to the Manichaeian worldview of its initiator. Nor did his immediate successor fare any better. When General Sani Abacha took over, he tried to hijack the benefits of the privatisation and commercialisation, particularly the mobile telephone services. "His own idea was to frustrate other prospective investors out of the market and use his own local and foreign fronts to place his outfit, TELECEL, in the controlling and dominant position" (Nnanna 2003). General Abacha was succeeded by General Abdulsalam Abubakar who also saw telecommunications as an extension of state power and awarded

numerous telecommunications licenses, ranging from direct tele-access to value added services (Otuya 2003).

Upon being sworn in on May 29 1999, one of the first things the current president, Olusegun Obasanjo, did was to suspend all telecommunications licenses issued by the previous regime, especially those meant for mobile access. He then set up a panel under an industry chieftain, Christopher Kolade, to audit and reassess all the licenses, at the end of which nearly all of them were cancelled.

### **THE COMING OF GSM TELEPHONY**

Having wiped the board virtually clean, the president decided to make public the process of issuing of licenses to operators. This was in line with the radical *glasnost* that the newly elected regime was trying to promote. At the same time, the new dispensation was clearly trying to get the best from a telecommunications market that had witnessed many profound changes over the previous decade and had in the process become quite competitive.

Cellular telephony was born in the United States,<sup>20</sup> but credit for the simplification of its previously complicated technology is usually given to the Nordic countries from where it spread to the rest of Europe. While a comprehensive history of the mobile phone is outside our thematic ambience, one critical point is worth setting out. This is the inevitable insertion of GSM into the specific politics of societies where the technology was either developed or refined. For instance, one reason why mobile technology diffused with ease throughout continental Europe was because, in the words of Agar (2003:60-61), “the European Commission, the civil service of the European project, had seen in GSM a political tool of immense value: telecommunications- and particularly GSM - would provide the infrastructure of a Europe ready to mount a convincing economic challenge to the US and Japan, and a pan-European telecoms network would encourage organisations to think European”.

The inauguration of the technology in December 1982 in Stockholm, Sweden by engineers and administrators from eleven European countries was therefore a profoundly political act. The acronym GSM initially stood for the countries involved (Groupe Special Mobile), but later became the Global Standard for Mobile Communications (Agar 2003:56). The initially sluggish public reaction to cellular phones may partly have been accounted for by their physical cumbersomeness and exorbitant cost<sup>21</sup>, but all this was soon to change. By 1996, GSM phones could be found in 103 diverse countries, from Australia to Russia, from South Africa to Azerbaijan (ibid). In the same year, 7 million people (10 per cent of the population) in the Philippines owned a mobile phone- almost twice the number with landlines.

Many factors were responsible for this sudden explosion in the number of mobile phone subscribers and the evolution of what we might call a mobile culture. The first explanation has necessarily to do with cost. As the knowledge of mobile technology grew and dispersed, so did the price of the average phone cascade. Essentially, consumers no longer had to make a straight choice between a mobile telephone or a small car, or indeed a car big enough to log a mobile phone around! Furthermore, a choice of payment methods brought the mobile within reach of people who survive outside the formal economy; often without a bank account or credit record (Ashurst 2004). Besides, as the prices fell, the “continuous miniaturisation of components” (Agar 2003:8) which had been a feature of electrical technology also ensured that the phones were increasingly lighter and more portable with time. By the year 2002, global subscriptions to cellular phones were reported to have exceeded the one billion mark (Agar 2003:5).

Apart from declining cost and user-friendliness, other factors made the mobile phone a hit with the consuming public. One of these is symbolic, having to do with the way in which the mobile phone is rooted in the affirmations and processes of the modern self.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that the mobile phone has become popular in an age that has become obsessed with individuality and assertion of personal freedoms. There is something essentially liberating<sup>23</sup> about owning a mobile phone. For the owner, the mobile phone performs a myriad of ‘miracles’, central among which are the ability to be multi-locational or trans-locational. As the network connecting communities in the global village become denser, so also does the need for communication increase. In the words of Rafael,

The cell phone gives its owner a sense of *being* someone even if he or she only a street vendor or a high school student—someone who can reach and be reached and is thus always in touch. The “manic” relationship to the cell phone is just this ready willingness to identify with it, or more precisely with what the machine is thought capable of doing. One not only has access to it; by virtue of its *omnipresence and proximity*, one becomes like it. That is to say, one becomes an apparatus for sending and receiving messages at all times (Rafael 2003:405) (Italics added).

One important cog in this communicative wheel is the capacity to send messages in ‘text’ form<sup>24</sup>. Indeed, one might argue that this is the main reason behind the global popularity of mobile phones.

What makes the ‘text’ so important and popular? For one, it seems mutually economically beneficial to both mobile phone subscribers and operators. As Rafael (2003:404) has noted, “unlike voice messages, text messages take up less bandwidth and

require far less time to convert into digitized packets available for transmission. It thus makes economic sense for service providers to encourage the use of text messaging in order to reserve greater bandwidth space for more expensive-and profitable- voice message”. Second, as adumbrated above in relation to the mobile phone itself, texting provides subscribers

with a way out of their surroundings. Thanks to the cell phone, they need not be present to others around them. Even when they are part of a socially defined group-say, commuters or mourners-*cell phone users are always somewhere else, receiving and transmitting messages from beyond their physical location*. It is in this sense that they become other than their socially delineated identity: not only cell phone users but cell phone “maniacs.” Because it rarely leaves their side, the phone becomes part of the hand, the digits an extension of the fingers. In certain cases, the hand takes the place of the mouth, the fingers that of the tongue (Rafael 2003:405-6).

This is not to say that texting does not have its own social drawbacks. Much has been said for example about its perceived tendency to “disrupt protocols of recognition and accountability” (Ibid:408). A rigorous examination of this and related claims falls outside the thematic vision of this paper. The point being made here is that it is in fact due to these and other personal and social possibilities (both negative and positive) that the mobile phone/texting has acquired its existing global popularity. Arguably the potential to bypass, negate, subvert, undermine, antagonise, or even complement the state, as the case may be, is encoded into the very ontology of the mobile phone.

This was the global state of affairs when Nigeria began the journey to license GSM operators in 2001. True to its earlier promise, the federal government threw open the auctioning process for four mobile licenses in January 2001. At the end of the day, each license was auctioned for a whopping \$285<sup>25</sup>, and by August 2001, three of the GSM operators had begun operations. These were the Zimbabwean-owned Econet Wireless Nigeria Limited,<sup>26</sup> the South-African-owned MTN Limited, and the state-owned NITEL. So popular did mobile technology become that within a few months, the companies had exceeded their highest expectations. Initially, the companies had been sceptical about investing in the Nigerian economy because of its perceived volatility and the country’s history of political instability. At the same time, they were unsure about the purchasing power of potential customers.

These fears were to give way to boundless optimism after a few months. For example, by September 30 2003, MTN could boast in excess of 1.3 million subscribers while its rival Econet had more than 850,000. Within the same period, both companies combined had spread their coverage to more than 1,500 villages and communities and over 100 cities

(Aragba-Akpore 2003). In total, both MTN and Econet have a total of more than 3 million lines out of which 2.8 million are fully subscribed (Eke 2003). Overall, within 24 months, with new investments put at \$3.8 billion (about N600 billion) and a teledensity of 2.6 telephone lines to 100 inhabitants, Nigeria's telecommunications sector was rated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) as the fastest growing in Africa (ibid). These figures prove to be truly remarkable when you consider that for the same period, a large part of the northern section of the country was yet to benefit from the services of the GSM companies (Otuya 2003).

The sudden explosion of GSM in Nigeria was, admittedly, part of a continent-wide momentum. 95.61 per cent of African users use GSM. In the past 12 months, there has been a 101.85 per cent growth of GSM users in Africa, as opposed to a growth rate of 52.49 per cent globally. The biggest African network is Vodacom which has over 7.5 million subscribers, while the total number of African subscribers (all technologies) is 34.3 million. The biggest market is in South Africa with 14.4 million users. This is expected to grow to 19 million by 2006 (Ashurst 2004:20).

The unexpectedly high number of users naturally translated into profits for the companies. Thus, in its first year of operation, MTN declared a pre-tax profit of N11 billion (*Daily Times* 11 August 2003). Naturally too, with these profits came a number of expectations, especially with respect to the quality of services rendered by the GSM companies. Many consumers believed that the companies were simply not doing enough, preferring to cash in on an unsuspecting public to the detriment of good service. The companies did not think so, insisting that they were doing enough within the specific limitations of the Nigerian environment. In the following section, we examine the contrasting arguments before going on to the boycott proper.

## **SUBSCRIBERS VERSUS GSM COMPANIES: BETWEEN SERVICE AND PROFIT**

*"Laye Obasanjo, eni to o kawo nlo phone"* (In the Obasanjo era, even the unlettered use phones) (*The Guardian* February 29 2004).

"It is true that what works elsewhere doesn't necessarily work in Nigeria. Elsewhere in the world, GSM services are not burdened by the kind of poor quality that afflicts Nigerian subscribers. Elsewhere in the world, GSM calls are made with one dial whether GSM to GSM; GSM to landline; or landline to GSM. The question of network overload nonsense does not arise" (Kingsley Osadolor 2003, quoted in *The Guardian* 23 September 2003).

Is there anything wrong with Nigeria? Why is it that nothing works here? Why is it that government is so insensitive to the pains and suffering of its people? Why is it that evil thrives so abundantly in Nigeria? Who will bring relief and restore hope to us? Who should we run to for protection from this wicked exploitation by these phone companies when a govt that ought to protect us maintains a colluding silence? Look at the National Communications Commission (NCC). What are they doing about this mindless rip-off? Nothing, absolutely nothing, because they are all using toll free lines. So they don't experience what we ordinary people go through in the hands of these GSM companies" (Joseph Akanbi, *ThisDay* July 26 2003).

The three statements above reflect the range of emotions provoked by the introduction of GSM telephony in Nigeria. While the first captures the popular elation and jubilation, the second and third speak to public disappointment with the quality of services provided by the mobile telephone companies. There was a clear division between those who specifically blame the phone companies, and those who think that it was the vaguely defined, yet ubiquitous, 'Nigerian factor' that was making its mark felt again. The disenchantment in question must be understood against the background of common expectations following Nigeria's return to civil rule after sixteen years of military rule. Among many anticipated 'dividends' of democracy, the coming of mobile telephony was expected to signal a radical improvement in the common lot. At the very least, mobile telecommunication was expected to accomplish some of the 'miracles' associated with its introduction in other parts of the world, for instance, 'abolishing' distance by facilitating the conduct of business and interpersonal relations. Behind this, arguably, was the 'telecommunicative fantasy' (Rafael 2003) of using the mobile telephone as a means of asserting a new collective identity, remodelling the terms of engagement with the state, and, above all, seeking and achieving social parity with the ruling class which had jealously monopolised communications technology for so long. As such, it was apparently the felt impotence of mobile technology to accomplish these tasks, or at least to begin to address them on an immediate basis, that fuelled the social anger which culminated in the boycott of 19 September 2003. Allied to this was the perceived failure of the state or the state-established National Communications Commission to call the telephone companies to order and impose sanctions as and when necessary. Apparently, it was even felt in some cases that the companies operated in cahoots with the federal authorities, a factor which made them largely impervious to the agitation of the larger public. This suspicion is reflected in Joseph Akanbi's questions and conclusion (above) as follows: "Who will bring relief and restore hope to us? Who should we run to for protection from this wicked exploitation by these phone companies when a govt that ought to protect us maintains a colluding silence? Look at the National Communications Commission (NCC). What are they doing about this mindless rip-off? Nothing, absolutely nothing, because they are all using toll free lines (given to them as freebies by

the phone companies). So they don't experience what we ordinary people go through in the hands of these GSM companies" (parenthesis added). Indeed, many people were eager to draw parallels between the activities of the phone companies and those of oil companies in the oil 'producing' areas which were similarly notorious for conniving with the state to undermine the interests of the Nigerian public (Frynas 1998).

The subscribers' case can be categorised in terms of complaints and demands.

### ***Complaints***

The basic complaints centred on the following:

- Arbitrary reduction of credits;
- Uncompleted calls;
- Poor signals, otherwise known as "no network coverage" or "network busy";
- Service breakage;
- Constant changes in contract terms;
- "Usurious" tariffs (believed to be among the highest, if not the highest, in the world);
- Misleading advertisements on new services;
- Oversubscribed networks, thus making access very difficult;
- Problem of interconnectivity among networks;
- Unsolicited diversion of calls;
- Text message failures;
- Artificial scarcity of recharge cards; and
- Surcharging of undelivered text messages.

### ***Proposals***

To ameliorate this situation, the subscribers advocated as follows:

- Reduction of call tariff to N20 (as opposed to N50) per call per minute across the board;
- Reduction of SIM pack to N5,000 across the board;
- Immediate implementation of the per second-billing system (as opposed to per minute-billing) by all operators;
- Free SMS service by all operators;
- Free calls during weekends and off-peak periods;
- Zero payment for all terminated and dropped calls;
- Indefinite access (as opposed to limited but renewable access period) to the GSM network for all subscribers;
- Immediate interconnection by all GSM operators, private telecommunication operators and NITEL; and,
- Cancellation of compulsory expiry dates for recharge cards.

Initially, these complaints and proposals circulated among subscribers and the wider public through mere word-of-mouth, text messages, phone calls and letters and articles in the print media. Beyond this, the first concrete initiative was the decision by Dr. Deolu Ogunbanjo and Prince Bayo Omotubora to instigate legal action against the two then operating companies, MTN and Econet. This was on March 8 2002, a date that, in retrospect, becomes symbolic for the formation of arguably the pioneer organisation to champion the cause of mobile phone subscribers in Nigeria- National Association of Telecommunications Subscribers (NATCOMS). In the words of Dr. Ogunbanjo himself, “It started when we sued MTN and ECONET last year...it was after the first hearing that we knew how much suffering Nigerian GSM users were going through. When we got out of the court so many people just surrounded us. It was a large crowd and that was where NATCOMS was formed” (see *The Guardian* 12 November 2003).

As the campaign against the GSM companies gathered momentum, similar pro-customer organisations sprang up, particularly in the run up to the September 19 protest. Notably, nearly all of such organisations were formed for the specific aim of mobilising for the protest, as opposed to developing long-term strategies to combat the perceived excesses of the phone companies. As such, many of them have since fallen quiet after the protest, leaving the media as the only continuous vehicle of agitation. Examples of the many organisations which mushroomed and have since disappeared from the public view are: the GSM Subscribers Association of Nigeria, led by Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa, Unofficial Consumer Protection Agency (UCPA), Nationwide Action Against Corruption (NAAC), Concerned GSM Subscribers in Nigeria, National Association of Mobile Phone Subscribers, led by a university Professor, Bunmi Ayoade, Probity in Nigeria (PIN), and Telecommunications Subscribers Rights Agenda (TSRA).

While NATCOMS took the legal route, these associations spearheaded a popular campaign to prosecute and defeat the phone companies in the court of public opinion. To complement the strategies listed earlier, they also distributed posters and leaflets and made a representation to the National Assembly where they could count on many sympathetic ears (see Osuagwu 2003).

But it was the role of the media in the articulation of the demands that was to prove crucial in the process, thereby helping us to see the media itself in the context of the prevailing economic and social circumstances. The initial message of the protesters was circulated by text and it read thus:

FROM SEPTEMBER 7-14 2003, SWITCH OFF YOUR GSM HANDSETS BETWEEN  
10AM-12 NOON DAILY.  
IN DEMAND OF

**REDUCED GSM CHARGES  
INTRODUCTION OF PER SECOND BILLING  
& BETTER SERVICES  
DO YOU KNOW THAT**

**THE GSM CHARGE OF N50 PER MINUTE IS THE HIGHEST IN THE WORLD? IN THE US, A MINUTE IS N20, IN EUROPE N23, IN CHINA N18, IN SOUTH AFRICA N22 AND IN GHANA N23. WHY N50 IN NIGERIA? THIS IS A RIP OFF! (DO NOT BELIEVE THEIR STORY THAT THEY PAY MORE FOR DIESEL IN NIGERIA). RIGHT NOW GSM OPERATORS IN THE UK ARE ABOUT TO FURTHER REDUCE CHARGES ON AIRTIMES.**

**ONE WEEK IS NOT TOO MUCH  
JOIN THE REDUCE THE GSM TARIFF PROTEST WEEK  
BOYCOTT OR SUSPEND ANY FURTHER PURCHASE OF ALL GSM MATERIALS INCLUDING SIM PACKS AND CARDS FROM ALL GSM OPERATORS FOR THE PERIOD OF THE PROTEST WEEK.**

However, for some reason, this initial campaign led by Concerned GSM Subscribers was not popular with the majority of subscribers. Part of the explanation may have had to do with the fact that the organisers did not see the need to court the media and woo it to their cause. Not that this would have been difficult. A casual survey of the media would reveal widespread disaffection caused by a similarly profound disenchantment with the services of the GSM companies. This is evidenced by some of the headlines of stories focusing on their activities. The following sample of story headlines seems to reflect the overall mood of the media: “Two years of GSM pains and gains”, “GSM providers rip Nigerians of millions daily”, “GSM is ‘Go Spend Money’”, “GSM: Two years, too many troubles”, “The Great GSM rip off”, “Lies the networks tell”, “The GSM Scam”, “Open Robbery”, “GSM Operations: A colossal rip-off”, “Grand Swindling Machine”, “GSM dream turns sour”, “GSM: Network Robbery or ‘Network Busy’?”

A word on the media in relation to the 19 September protest is apposite at this point. It is fair to say that in general the media (and here we refer in the main to the print media) lived up to its theoretical billing as the megaphone of civil society. The efforts of the print publications at projecting the cause of subscribers were complemented notably by *GSM Today*,<sup>27</sup> arguably the first and only electronic magazine in the country so far. Edited by John Sagai Adam, the self-proclaimed *e-zine* gave ample coverage to all activities related to the boycott, both from the point of view of subscribers or the GSM companies. But the real battle between the protesters and the companies to shape public imagination took place in the print media, and some of the actions that the GSM companies took in this regard are particularly instructive.

While, as noted earlier, subscribers limited themselves to letters to the editor and direct articles, the companies by contrast actively courted the media. The enduring symbol of this active courtship was the decision by the companies to give free handsets and lines to senior editors of media organisations.<sup>28</sup> This was complemented by the huge numbers of paid advertorials which they (the companies) published in different newspapers. These two factors made the phone companies extremely popular with the media. The editors must have felt very comfortable with the arrangement, for when the GSM companies wanted the editors to return the handsets early last year, they were firmly rebuffed<sup>29</sup>.

Perhaps this was why the planned boycott was not an instant hit with the media, and part of the reason why the media eventually decided to come on board might be traced to the tenacity of the subscribers and the pungency of the text message which caught the popular imagination. In this regard, contrary to the earlier call to action which demanded that subscribers switch off for two hours everyday between 7-14 September, the latter text was simple and canvassed a one-day boycott. The message read thus: “Let’s force GSM tariffs down. Join a mass protest switch off ur fone on fri sept 19 ’03. They’ll lose millions. It worked in US & Argentina. Spread Dis txt”. It is also not unlikely that many were attracted to the cause by the encouragement that the method had already worked in other parts of the world, thus making its success in Nigeria feasible. Besides, evidence that the protest had struck the right chord could be seen in the decision of at least two newspapers, *New Age* and *The Vanguard* to feature a countdown to the boycott. While *New Age* encouraged its readers to follow the boycott and related events, and send their views comments to its website, *Vanguard* for its part created a column to collate arguments and views from the point of view of both the protesters and the service providers. For some reason however, this column disappeared a few days to the boycott, spawning rumours that the newspaper had been induced to take a dive.

While it was impossible to ascertain whether this was true or not in the field, there was little doubt that it was probably too late to change the course of public opinion. Media opinion notwithstanding, many subscribers were clearly fed up with the services of the GSM companies, and the following comments from three different subscribers is a useful gauge of overall public disillusionment:

It has been horrible exchanging texts with people this past week, the first week of MTN’s free texting month. It must be that people reacted to this free texting stuff so well that they have crashed the data capacity of the leading GSM network. You can’t get a word of text through. The message would simply not go. And when finally your handset tells you the message has been sent, don’t count on it. Put a call through to crosscheck. You will most certainly find that it was never delivered. Suddenly that purpose of text messaging is defeated. If you can never be sure that your text will be delivered, and you have to call every time to make

certain, what's the point of texting? None. Except your physiotherapist recommended constant exercise of your thumb. And then, some people are bound to cry soon enough when they realize their folly...Some text I sent personally earlier in the week are still hung up somewhere in the network." (John Awe, "Textual Intercourse" *Nigerian Tribune* 14 August 2003)

The MTN network has been moving from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm. At first it was just loss-of-service for a few hours but these days, it is becoming something else. Here is a catalogue of the BITTER connection...Calls get chopped-off while you are still speaking. MTN bills you. You call, the timer is ticking, but you can't hear the other person. MTN still bills you. You can't even load your account sometimes (even using the network-code method, which is supposed to free up voice channels, doesn't work). Even when you load, it doesn't get credited for hours so don't throw away your recharge card until you see that your call credits have actually increased. SMS takes days to get to its destination sometimes. There are times when SMS is "free" for hours on end. MTN then sucks up the bill later and leaves its subscribers in confusion. What is terrible is that these are the CURRENT problems of even after the transmission backbone. MTN used to promise us that things will get better after the backbone but these days, they say it is after the SECOND transmission backbone before things will get better. Isn't that another way of saying "Abracadabra- the more you see the less you understand?" (*GSM Today*, August 2003)

Talking about GSM we have to give credit to President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration for deeming it fit to even bring it into the country. But one thing must be said also that the venture has been very very expensive beginning from when the licenses were sold. It was very expensive. Also, the commission did not see the wisdom in making sure that the GSM operators have good facilities on ground before issuing them with the license. The problem we have on ground now is that the lines are there but no good facilities that can carry them because they are already over stretched especially the last batch of lines that were sold out. You discover most of the lines you cannot use them to call because the network is already jam-packed. That is just one of the problems of the network. The other problem is the bills; they are quite high. Not just that they are high but they criminally manipulated it that you buy a recharge card now and cannot keep it for long...Then the bills keep running whether you use it or not. A friend told me that in Israel you could have a line and buy a card for fifteen days and can keep it as long as one month. But in Nigeria once the fifteen days are gone you've lost the money. Those are basically the problems of GSM here, they are very very expensive and frustrating. In nearby African countries, a SIM pack is cheaper

than what we buy here.” (Paul Onwude, secretary Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO), North-West Zone *New Nigerian Weekly* 16 August 2003)

If anything is clear from the discussion thus far, it is that the protesters did not have a monopoly of the public ear. The service providers, if we can call them that in the light of the quality delivery issues raised by the subscribers, also put their own case across as vigorously as possible. In a curious convergence with some of the claims made by the protesters, the companies also blamed factors integral to the Nigerian state and social environment for their alleged poor services. The easiest target was electricity, the erratic supply of which they blamed for their failure to guarantee reliable signals to their customers. The MTN claimed for instance that due to frequent power outages, it used over a million litres of diesel a day to power generators at its installations across the country. The same situation apparently applies to Econet. The unreliability of power supply also affects other things. According to Emeka Oparah, the Head of Corporate Affairs of Econet, it means for example that while a base station costs \$250,000 in South Africa, the same facility goes for \$375,000 in Nigeria because it has to be reconfigured to make it compatible with the erratic power supply in Nigeria (Oparah 2003).

As a result, the GSM companies argue, rather than castigate them for charging exorbitant tariffs for their products, subscribers ought to appreciate the unique constraints imposed by the Nigerian socio-political environment. Some of these constraints include the \$285 million dollars paid for licenses which the companies considered to be among the highest in the world, and the failure of the federal government to channel the same money into developing necessary infrastructure as earlier promised:<sup>30</sup> the huge investments in hiring private security services to protect staff and equipment; and the huge sums paid out as ransom whenever to liberate kidnapped staff and/or protect installations from damage by social miscreants, known in the Nigerian parlance as ‘Area Boys’.<sup>31</sup> Other social constraints which, according to the companies, justified the allegedly high tariffs imposed for services are: the relatively low earnings of Nigerian consumers and the hugely unfavourable exchange rate of the Nigerian Naira to the dollar in a dollar-denominated market; the dependence of the companies on expatriate staff who are necessarily remunerated in hard currency; and the dearth of well-trained Nigerian personnel and the attendant huge corporate investment in the training of new recruits. Finally, the service providers also claim that there are other hidden cost elements in the provision of GSM services which seem to justify the allegedly high tariffs. These are: interconnection costs, overheads, taxes and levies, interest charges and amortisation on leased facilities (Oparah 2003).

Majority of subscribers did not seem to have been impressed by these arguments. Many say for instance that the GSM companies knew well in advance of the vagaries of the Nigerian socio-economic environment before deciding to take the plunge, and so cannot

use the same environment as an excuse to either charge high tariffs or provide poor services. In any case, the subscribers were convinced that the companies might have decided to invest in the Nigerian telecommunications industry *because of* the same environmental limitations, given the scope it is known to provide for corporate profiteering. They argue that it is because the companies were in cahoots with the National Communications Commission (NCC) for example that they persistently got away with their embarrassing services, and that they were only out to make profit out of poor customers. The GSM companies' case was not helped by the revelations in the media about the Central Bank of Nigeria's concern that the companies' cash flow is usually not allowed to stay for more than a few weeks in Nigerian banks before it is converted to foreign exchange for one purchase or the other, eliciting the worry that they may only be contributing to cost of turnover (COT) of the banks rather than the overall economy (see *ThisDay* August 6 2003). This was the evidence many needed to confirm their suspicion that the companies were more interested in profit than service to their customers.

### **THE SEPTEMBER 19 2003 BOYCOTT AND ITS AFTERMATH**

This was the discursive balance in the weeks preceding and leading up to the 19 September boycott, and many of these arguments have continued to resonate even after that event. But what accounted for the choice of Friday September 19 by the protesters? According to Ojemaye Otitoka who claims to have sent out the inaugural text message on 19 August 2003, "The choice of September 19 2003 was simply because that would be one month from the date of sending out the first message. I figured that one month would be enough time for the word to spread. In addition, Sept 19 is a Friday, and that seemed a perfect working day when Nigerians would find it easier to make the required service of dispensing with making GSM calls" (see *The Guardian* 19 September 2003).

That day has since gone down in the annals as a landmark in the history of public agitation and customer-corporation relations in Nigeria. The organisers were also convinced that even beyond the obvious symbolism, they were able to burrow a hole in the pockets of the GSM companies. According to them, an estimated 75 per cent of mobile phone users switched off their phones in apparent compliance with the boycott call, a claim which, if true, would have led to the companies losing millions of Naira. The companies themselves admitted a substantial number of customers actually switched off their phones, but insisted that these were fewer than the 75 per cent claimed by the protesters. What we do know of course is that a number of high profile individuals joined the protesters, thus giving their case a certain moral validation. Two examples are Gani Fawehinmi, lawyer and social justice crusader, and former external affairs minister, Bolaji Akinyemi.

To be sure, the public attitude towards the boycott was mixed. Although the print media generally recorded a simple victory for the protesters, it was also apparent that a significant number of people had decided not to obey the boycott for many reasons, including the possible loss of crucial business contacts and scepticism about the possibility of the boycott to achieve the intended ends.

But no one could doubt the dent that the boycott and the fractious debate leading to it had left on the corporate image of the GSM companies, and this, it seems, was more satisfying to the protesters. This perception was confirmed when, in the weeks following the boycott, the companies embarked on a charm offensive intended to win back the larger public and disaffected customers. For example, both MTN and Econet vigorously renewed their commitment to ‘corporate social responsibility’ by promoting a number of high profile social causes. Both, especially MTN, have become visible in the sporting and educational arenas, and MTN’s Book Aid Programme is promoted in the media as its own contribution to Nigeria’s search for quality education.<sup>32</sup> For its part, Globacom, the indigenous-owned corporation which began operations in August 2003 has made a considerable impact in the promotion of soccer. It sponsors the premier division of the national soccer league which has since been renamed the *NFA Globacom Premiership*, and was a constant presence in the media in January 2004 when Nigeria settled for a bronze medal in the 24<sup>th</sup> edition of the African Cup of Nations football tournament. Many supporters who made it to Tunisia, the venue of the tournament, to cheer on the national soccer team, did so thanks to sponsorship from the company.

In addition to these, the protesters could also point to a few other concrete gains. The major one perhaps is the introduction of per second billing (PSB) as opposed to per minute billing (PMB) which subscribers complained about as it meant that they automatically had to pay for the whole of the next minute for calls that exceeded the previous minute even by a second. The excuse of the subscribers had been that it was impossible to offer customers per second billing until they attained “reasonable maturity” or at least three years after the commencement of operations. However, following the boycott and the introduction of *Glomobile* which gave its customers the per second billing option on August 29 2003, Econet and MTN had no choice but to follow suit. Yet, they did not do this without attempting to claw something back- subscribers who opted to be billed on the per second billing platform were made to pay a switch over fee of N300 each (Oluseitan 2003). In addition, in an apparent attempt to recoup some of the money they conceivably lost in making the per second billing platform available to interested customers, both MTN and Econet started charging specified amounts for a range of services that were previously free. For example, access to the MTN customer service centre and the customer’s account balance (which used to be free) now attracted N6 per minute or 6k per second. To further assuage disgruntled customers, MTN also offered 100 free texts many of which, ironically, did not reach their destinations as usual.

One other seemingly positive fallout of the boycott could be noticed in the increased determination of the Ernest Ndukwe-led National Communications Commission (NCC) to ensure that the compliance of the service providers with the industry's basic regulations. To this end, it introduced the idea of the establishment of a Consumer Arbitration Panel in each of the 36 states of the country to listen to the grievances of subscribers and arbitrate where possible in disagreements between them and the GSM companies. In addition, the NCC issued a firm deadline on interconnectivity<sup>33</sup> to the companies, although as at the time of writing, the companies were yet to comply despite repeated calls and new deadlines.<sup>34</sup>

The process leading to the boycott also stimulated official attention to the plight of consumers, and it is on record that at least on two occasions, the senior officials of both MTN and Econet were invited to the federal capital in Abuja to defend themselves. They were also made to appear before the Senate Committee on Commerce and Communications for the same purpose.

## **MOBILE TECHNOLOGY, CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN NIGERIA: CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS**

GSM phones are a great blessing in our lives. Chris Ngige remains Governor of Anambra state today largely because he had access to a GSM phone. In July 2003, and now a week ago, he was able to alert the larger community about plans to remove him from office with the aid of cell phones. In the past, before the aid of GSM, he would have been entirely at the mercy of his abductors. When Ngige announced that the President was refusing to take his calls, or that he had blocked his calls, he was of course referring to the President's GSM phone. These new phones provide direct personal contact. We relate to them in a private manner. GSM phones have similarly reduced the distances in our lives. Reuben Abati, "How Did We Live Without GSM?" (*The Guardian on Sunday* 11 January 2004)

Religion was once known as the opium of the people. That was in the heyday of Karl Marx and communism. A new age has dawned with a new opium known as GSM. In this brave new world of capitalism and globalisation, GSM is the drug that lulled everybody into excited stupor. People are daily going broke in the name of making very expensive phone calls, but like all drug addicts kicking the habit is easier said than done. (Uzor Maxim Uzoatu, "GSM as Opium of the People" *New Age* September 16 2003)

There is no doubt that the introduction of mobile telephony has radically transformed the Nigerian social landscape. By the end of 2003, there were more than two million mobile

phone subscribers in the country. This transformation is what the two commentators above speak eloquently of. As Reuben Abati has noted, it (mobile telephony) has even had a totally unforetold impact on national politics, helping as it did to free Governor Chris Ngige of Anambra state from the clutches of his captors.

Evidently, it has also given civil society a new energy by providing a new *cause* around which to organise, and a new *platform* for contesting both statist and corporatist hegemonies. Furthermore, mobile telephony has come to manifest simultaneously as both the *subject* and *instrument* of agitation, lending a new dimension to the nature of the struggle for the public space in Nigeria. In this wise, it ought to be noted that 9/19 was symbolic both in the context of anti-corporatist politics in the country; and the use of technological means (the text message in particular) as a tool for righting perceived wrongs in the domains of both politics and communications.

From the point of view of our founding hypothesis however, what appears to be even more important is the way in which the totality of the boycott, beginning from the process of mobilisation for it, through the strategies employed by the main protagonists (protesters and service providers), and down to its aftermath helps illuminate the dynamics of actually existing civil society. We have seen (among other things) ordinary citizens' mobilisation (in this case against entrenched business interests) on the platform of civil society; the circumstances under which civil society 'erupts' or emerges; and the nodes on the social landscape at which civil society and the state both connect and depart. At the same time, we hope that considerable light has been shed on the configuration, strengths, and inevitably, weaknesses of civil society. We argue that this is a good way of showing up the validity or otherwise of claims made in the theoretical literature in respect of civil society in social formations like Nigeria's.

We now move on to some observations which follow logically from the foregoing and arise from the data presented in the preceding paragraphs. The first concerns the relationship between (mobile) technology and social democratic activism. It would seem from our analysis here that optimistic theoretical prognoses about the utility of mobile technology for social activism were partly justified. Through text messaging and concerted media mobilisation, the organisers of the 9/19 boycott were able to call official and corporate attention to the challenges facing mobile telephone users. And while the protest did not necessarily bring down a government as was controversially the case in the Philippines, it at least led to a number of decisions which partly redressed the situation of subscribers. Some of these decisions have been mentioned.

Nevertheless, as in the Philippines, it could also be argued that the boycott also showed up the very limitations of the use of technology for purposes of social justice. While Rafael (2003) has noted in the case of EDSA II that the protesters neither challenged the

nature of the state nor its class divisions, and that at the end of the day President Joseph Estrada was replaced by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, his Vice President and daughter of a previous president; in the case of the 19 September boycott, it can also be observed that at the end of the day, the GSM companies appeared to have had the last word by withdrawing with one hand what they had given away with the other. But does it therefore mean that mobile technology is largely ineffectual? Again, that may not be the case. Instructively, in the Philippines, one of the first steps taken by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was to ban “malicious, profane, and obscene texts” (see Agar 2003:109), a move which above anything else demonstrates her recognition of the potential power of text messaging.

One tentative conclusion is that mobile telephony or technology alone, while no doubt important, may not be sufficient to accomplish specific democratic objectives. For one, it seems to be more effective when aligned with other instruments geared towards the same end. Second, and more important, its effectiveness is greatly determined by the prior strength and creativity of the social forces in whose hands it is a weapon. Technology (including mobile technology), it seems, does nothing on its own but is impacted by specific social conditions. To cite Agar’s dialectical observation about the Filipino experience, “mobile phones are moulded by the countries they are used in and give form to the nation in return” (Agar 2003:110). Thus, for Nigeria, while mobile telephony has no doubt come to be seen as a veritable instrument of political struggle, its potential effectiveness is bound to be determined by the way in which it is used. And while it is definitely a welcome addition to civil society’s arsenal, it may not necessarily fulfil the fondest telecommunicative fantasies about securing total victory in the contest for social and economic justice.

Our next observation centres on civil society, especially how its character seems to change in relation to the issues around which it mobilises at a given historical moment. From the Nigerian case outlined above, it would seem as if social adversity and a perception of injustice (economic or political) are required to rouse civil society into action. In the aftermath of Nigeria’s return to civil rule in May 1999, the landscape that is civil society has been gradually reconfigured by the ‘desertion’ of many influential figures to the domain of government, a process which has led to the relative emptying out and weakening of civil society. As part of the same process, many Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) which had sprung up earlier to mobilise against military rule have sought to reinvent themselves, with many leaving Lagos (the former capital and seat of democratic activism) for Abuja, federal capital since 1991, to seek new opportunities. The overall result of this process, what we might call the transformation of political participation, has been to weaken civil society and expose it to the depredations of the state.

This was the situation in the realm of civil society as agitation for the boycott gathered and spread, and it comes as no surprise that many of the public voices that had relatively fallen silent in the previous three years or so saw it as an opportunity to weigh in on behalf of the public and make themselves heard again. In this sense, the boycott could be said to have presented civil society with both a new platform for mobilising as well as a welcome opportunity to re-charge itself.

Yet, given what we have observed earlier about the limitations of technology, and mobile telephony in particular, it is obvious that civil society cannot rely absolutely on it in order to reinvent itself. Indeed, many associations sprang up in the heat of the day to champion the cause of the protesters, but as we have noted earlier, majority of them have since become strangely inaudible, highlighting the critical need for organisational continuity on the part of civil society actors. In this wise, it is reassuring to observe that, after the boycott, some of the organisations have continued to pursue the judicial option. For example, on November 23 2003, an Abuja Federal High Court granted a group, Nationwide, permission to sue the GSM companies for failure to connect their networks (Okenwa 2003).

The final point concerns the relationship between civil society and the state. The state was a recurring decimal in the process which we have outlined in this chapter. It took the rap from civil society organisations and citizens who thought that it had failed to take firm action against the erring telephone companies. Some went to the extent of accusing it of acting in cahoots with the service providers. The latter, for their part, blamed it for not providing adequate infrastructure (like regular electricity and security) that might have made life less difficult for them and made it easier for them to satisfy their customers. They also blamed it for not channelling the huge sums paid for licenses into the development of required infrastructure for the communications industry. Leaving the merits or otherwise of these allegations aside, what definitely emerges is that to be effective, civil society requires a state that is efficient, transparent, firm, and able to enforce compliance with its wishes without degenerating into tyranny. Notably, the GSM companies failed to link up their trunks despite repeated calls from the federal authorities to do so. While it is not unknown for business concerns to try to maximise profit, experience shows that it usually takes the firmness and determination of the state to rein them in. Lastly, it is also apparent that no matter how determined, civil society, ranged against the immense powers that huge business concerns are capable of mustering, cannot create the desired changes in society alone. It requires a strong state that is resolutely committed to the rule of the law and social transparency.

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**Interviews:** Bode Opeseitan, Festus Adedayo, Segun Olatunji (May-July 2003)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The recent global upsurge of interest in civil society has inevitably produced a chaos of understandings. For a brilliant summary of a confusing (and often confused) debate, see the "Introduction" by John and Jean Comaroff to their edited volume (1999). In this paper, civil society will be understood as the free association of ordinary citizens in pursuit of the common good. The conceptual lineage to which this understanding is closest is what might be called the Dahrendorf School which envisions civil society as 'the anchorage of liberty'. See Dahrendorf (1990).

<sup>2</sup> Such claims range from the outright denial of the possibility of civil society in African and other non-Western societies (Gellner 1994), to other controversial assertions about the character of civil society in Africa, and the nature of its relationship with the state. For a summary of this debate see Obadare (2002).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this see Adebani (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Most probably a pseudonym for Dr. Deolu Ogunbanjo.

<sup>5</sup> See *The Guardian*, Lagos, 19 September 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Here, we draw theoretical inspiration from Albert Hirschman's landmark study of *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970).

<sup>7</sup> For more on this see for example Borgmann (1987), Heidegger (1977) and Cooper (2002).

<sup>8</sup> See for example Bauman (2000), and Gaonkar and Povinelli's incisive introduction to *Public Culture's* 'Accidental Issue' on 'Technologies of Public Persuasion' Volume 15, Number 3, Fall 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Kuvaja and Mursu (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Many African/ist commentators also concur with this conclusion. See for example Yau (2003), Williams (2004), Cogburn and Adeya (1999) and De Alcantara (2001).

<sup>11</sup> See Kuvaja and Mursu (2003:7).

<sup>12</sup> See Lekan Fadeyi, "Study Rates Nigeria Low in Internet Usage" *The Guardian*, Lagos, 22 February 2004.

<sup>13</sup> This is not unheard of as the government of China for instance continues to impose varying degrees of restriction on its people.

<sup>14</sup> See Adebani (2001).

<sup>15</sup> See Ochereome Nnanna, "The Great GSM Boycott" *Vanguard*, Lagos, September 15 2003.

<sup>16</sup> After EDSA I, the popular insurrection against Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. The full meaning of EDSA is Epifanio de los Santos Avenue.

<sup>17</sup> Erap was Joseph Estrada's text-compliant nickname. It means 'buddy' backwards in Tagalog, the Philippines' main language.

<sup>18</sup> See Ochereome Nnanna (2003).

<sup>19</sup> See *The Guardian*, Lagos, 12 November 2003.

<sup>20</sup> For a global history of the mobile phone see Agar (2003).

<sup>21</sup> Agar notes that the first generation of cell phones cost the equivalent of a small car and were so heavy that you needed a car to transport them. Not exactly mobile, then.

<sup>22</sup> For more on this see Myerson (2001).

<sup>23</sup> This is argument that can be stood on its head as it can also be argued that in a sense, the mobile phone possesses the capacity to 'imprison' or fixate.

<sup>24</sup> The first text message was sent accidentally in 1993 by Riku Pihkonen, a Nokia engineering student. At that time, it was not thought to be important. See Agar (2003:169).

<sup>25</sup> The high cost of the licenses was to become an issue in the run up to the 19 September 2003 boycott. The GSM companies claimed that the cost was one of the highest in the world, seemingly justifying the exorbitant tariffs which the protesters also claimed were among the highest in the world.

<sup>26</sup> As at the time of writing, it was embroiled in a long-drawn takeover bid by South-African based Vodacom, a subsidiary of Vodafone UK.

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<sup>27</sup> Established in February 2002, GSM Today’s declared aim is to “timely, educative and actionable information on GSM in Nigeria”. See its homepage at: <http://www.geocities.com/gsmtodayezine/About.html> accessed on March 4 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Personal communication with a newspaper editor, Lagos, July 2003.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> It is on record that this money was paid into the federation account from where it was eventually shared among the three tiers of government-federal, state and local.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the phenomenon of ‘Area Boys’ see Herault and Adesanmi (1997).

<sup>32</sup> See for example *The Punch*, Lagos, June 12 2003.

<sup>33</sup> This was one of the issues behind the boycott. The service providers could not agree on the modalities for opening their trunks to one another, making it impossible at best and nightmarish at worst for users to make calls between networks. One result is the quite ridiculous sight of consumers with three different handsets for the three different networks.

<sup>34</sup> The first deadline expired on November 20 2003.