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MOBILE MASHUPS

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Vehicle/phone mash-ups (1): bike-phones and boat-phones

Accounts of cell phone appropriation in developing countries are filled with tales of ingenious mash-ups combining public phones with a variety of vehicles. Here is a sample:

- Two disabled Kenyans have transformed their wheelchairs into mobile payphone platforms
- in Accra, public phone operators can lease an *i-Tel "POP" station* (a phone booth mounted on a tricycle) from Spacefon, and pedal to high-traffic spots where business can be found.
- On a small boat that ferries people along the Uganda shore of Lake Victoria, passengers can use a solar-powered wireless phone booth.
- In Rajasthan, Shyam Telecom has mounted mobile phones on a fleet of 200 rickshaws, whose drivers are "largely drawn from those at the margins of society - the disabled and women."

These are often told as user appropriation stories. But in fact (with the

possible exception of the wheelchair phone) they are cases where suppliers **re-claim** earlier user innovation. In many African and Asian countries, when cell phones first appeared, enterprising individuals appropriated the new technology as "public phones," reselling their minutes on the street. Mobile phone companies were quick to **co-opt**
this innovative practice. They provided micro-loans to the public phone entrepreneurs and rolled-out accounting features that helped them manage their retail business. Some went further and came up with public payphones mounted on various kinds of vehicles.

These phone/transportation mash-ups make for striking pictures, underscoring the phone's mobility. However, beyond this symbolic value, I wonder what real need they serve. Has anyone examined the details of the bike-phone business? The Rajasthan article cites a 75,000 rupee ($1,641) cost for the rickshaw set-up. This only works because Shyam Telecom gives the rickshaws away, as charity. And is the guy on the boat calling his family so they can pick him up as soon as the boat docks, just like impatient frequent-flyers do as soon as their plane has landed? These may well make sense as publicity stunts by phone operators, but it isn't clear they constitute useful innovation.

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