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Global Mobile Media: The Cultural Politics of Smartphones and Open Mobile Networks

By June 2010, there will be a likely 5 billion mobile phone subscriptions worldwide. Mobile phones are now well established as key cultural technologies, and now we are witnessing the consolidation of particular, but still not well understood or especially legible political and cultural economies of global mobile media. Since the launch of the iPhone in mid-2007, the area of smartphones — or advanced multimedia mobile phones — has become increasingly important. Accordingly, in this paper, I offer an account of the cultural politics of smartphones — and why this is important not just for the involutioned consumption preferences of the global North, but indeed for the prospects for open mobile networks internationally.

Firstly, I look at the rise of the iPhone, its modification in different countries around the world (US, Australia, China), and how its affordances compare with other leading smartphones (such as Blackberry, Nokia, HTC Touch, and Google's Android). Secondly, I analyse the phenomenal development of 'apps' for cellular mobile platforms, contrasting the controls employed by Apple, with those of other 'apps' stores. Thirdly, I place the shaping and regulation of mobile apps in a general account of the politics and possibilities of open mobile networks — as crucially important technologies, channels, spaces, and conduits, yet a species of media still lacking a vision for democratic, cultural futures.