Exploring Mobile-only Internet Use: Results of a Training Study in Urban South Africa

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Abstract

Using an ethnographic action research approach, the study explores the challenges, practices, and emergent framings of mobile-only Internet use in a resource-constrained setting. We trained eight women in a nongovernmental organization’s collective in South Africa, none of whom had used a personal computer, how to access the Internet on mobile handsets they already owned. Six months after training, most continued to use the mobile Internet for a combination of utility, entertainment, and connection, but they had encountered barriers, including affordability and difficulty of use. Participants’ assessments mingled aspirational and actual utility of the channel with and against a background of socioeconomic constraints. Discussion links the digital literacy perspective to the broader theoretical frameworks of domestication, adaptive structuration, and appropriation.

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