

Africa calling: How to say a lot with a little

Description

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When we had cell phones it was called â??beeping.â?• Now in the era of smartphones another word serves better. Itâ??s â??flashingâ?• or â??making a flash call.â?• I think we even did it with land lines as well back in the day. Children away from home would *flash call* their parents. Though we didnâ??t recognise it as a thing then.

To make a flash call is to send a message to someone for free simply by calling them up on your phone. Then you (the caller) hang up before the other person gets round to answering the call. As long as the party you are phoning doesnâ??t pick up the call then you have at least gained their attention without having to pay for a call. Thatâ??s a flash call.

The practice has flourished with caller ID. The recipient of the flash call sees the number or name of the person who just called.

Flash calling is common in Africa, and is touted as one of the practices that is transforming communication and commerce in African countries. It sustains the life of the opportunistic â??micro-entrepreneur,â?• though the practice extends to mobile phone communication in general.



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I had several conversations about flash calling with local residents when I was in Kenya last week. A driver-guide took me to visit Kibera, the â??shanty townâ?• in Nairobi. During the journey he mentioned that he had just received a â??flash callâ?• on his cell phone. Unaccustomed to the local accent I had to ask for the phrase again. Then I recalled the practice first explained as *beeping* by a presenter at a mobile communications conference in 2005.

Minimum code

At the conference, Jonathan Donner had recounted this minimal communicative practice and its secret value to economic development. It represented a kind of *appropriation* â?? grass-roots improvisation with a technological infrastructure that is designed for and supported by a relatively affluent sector of the population.

What do you do when you receive a flash call? That depends on whether you have established a flash call practice with the person at the other end, which also depends on context.

Flash code rules

A 2007 article by Donner outlined some of the â??rulesâ?• built into this flash call code system. Here they are in my own words.

- Rule 1: You generally flash call people with more resources (money) than you. I encountered this as a mild complaint by middle class bosses and property owners in Kenya. Tips, gifts, favours and unwritten obligations abound in developing economies that donâ??t yet have minimum wage contracts. So in rural areas the staff would, of course, expect the manager to return the call and thereby pick up the cost. But the use of flash calls is evident in any commercial, familial or social context in which there is a recognised income disparity.

- Rule 2: Itâ??s ok to flash call friends and family with the excuse that you have run out of minutes on your pay-as-you-go SIM deal. The rules between flash calling intimates are different to the rules in more distant relationships.
- Rule 3: Donâ??t flash call someone if you are seeking favourable treatment, e.g. trying to sell something, seeking a job, in a dating scenario, or otherwise trying to create a positive impression.
- Rule 4: Donâ??t flash call to the point where it annoys others. I gather that here it is not just the inconvenience of having to pay for the call, but the feeling that you are being harangued or pestered by a growing missed-call log on your cell phone.



Flash code contexts

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Donnerâ??s account is the role of context.

- You typically flash call when there is already an understanding or relationship between the caller and recipient. That relationship establishes the context of the communication.
- Flash calls have to be interpreted. You donâ??t always need to call back from a flash call. The empty call itself carries the meaning. Immanuel, one of Donnerâ??s interviewees, said that â??a beep can mean the exact opposite of the one before it. In his case, some of his dairy farmers beep to say, â??there is no milk,â?? others to say, â??there is milk.â?? The only difference in what Immanuel sees is the number on the missed call log; he uses his knowledge of the relational context and the meaning of past beeps to determine which beeps â??meanâ?? whatâ?• (13).
- Flash callers are adept at establishing their own communication code using flash calling. Donner describes interviewee Patrickâ??s case, which â??illustrates how multiple beeps from the same person can mean different things during the course of a day: â??When my wife sees a morning beep, she knows I am just saying hi, but if my wife beeps me twice in the late evening, I know that she is done with her work and then I always go to pick her up. I always call back if she beeps more than once.â??â??â?? (13).
- Flash calling reveals and reinforces social contexts. To flash call someone could serve as a sign of subservience. Constant willingness to call back serves as a sign of generosity, wealth or eagerness.

Of course, errors occur in these communications, but flash call communications can be very precise, and have a ready-made backup procedure â?? you can always speak to the person at the other end of the line and seek clarification.

Has the ubiquity of social media taken over from flash call practices? A more recent article by Rebecca Hayes and colleagues called â??One click, many meanings: Interpreting paralinguistic digital affordances in social mediaâ?• indicates the extent now of such minimal codes in everyday life.



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References

- Donner, Jonathan. 2005. What can Be said with a missed call? Beeping via mobile phones in sub-Saharan Africa. In K. NyÃri (ed.), Proc. Seeing, Understanding, Learning in the Mobile Age: 267-276. Budapest: Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and T-Mobile Hungary Co Ltd.
- Donner, Jonathan. 2007. The rules of beeping: Exchanging messages via intentional â??missed callsâ?? on mobile phones. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, (13) 1, 1-22.
- Hayes, Rebecca A., Caleb T. Carr, and Donghee Yvette Wohn. 2016. One click, many meanings: Interpreting paralinguistic digital affordances in social media. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, (60) 1, 171-187.

Note

- The photographs here are in or around Kibera, a poorer but enterprise-rich suburb of Nairobi. The second picture shows a green truck in the distance. I thought it was a political rally at first, but as we drew closer to the intersection, it was apparent that there was a salesperson with a megaphone touting mobile phones to a large crowd.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. beeping
2. ciphercity
3. code
4. communication
5. flash call

6. flashing

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