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The rise of African SIM registration: The emerging dynamics of regulatory change

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The rise of African SIM registration:  
The emerging dynamics of regulatory change  
by Kevin P. Donovan and Aaron K. Martin

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## Abstract

The African experience with mobile telephony has been extolled as a defining moment in the continent's contemporary economic, social, and political development. Yet SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) registration schemes are threatening to throttle the technology's developmental potential. These mandates, which require the registration of identity information to activate a mobile SIM card, are fast becoming universal in Africa, with little to no public debate about the wider social or political effects. Whereas some authors have explored the motivations behind these drives, as well as their potential economic impacts, this paper focuses its critique on the broader diversity of implications of this regulatory transformation. Viewing SIM registration through a lens that combines surveillance studies and information & communication technologies for development, it examines elements of resistance across a range of actors, as well as other emerging effects like access barriers, linkages to financialization, and Africa's budding mobile surveillance society.

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## I. Introduction: The rise of the African mobile society

In 1999, only 10 percent of the African population was covered by a mobile signal; ten years later, that figure was 60 percent (Aker and Mbiti, 2010). Today, of the six billion mobile subscriptions globally, approximately 695 million are in Africa (Baker, 2012), which is currently home to over a one billion people. More than 735 million subscribers were expected in Africa by the end of 2012 (GSMA, 2011) and it is estimated that it will have one billion subscribers by at least 2016 (Reed, 2011). Although beginning with basic phones and low-bandwidth connectivity, Africans increasingly have access to high-quality 3G networks and affordable

