

The Future Is Calling

Anthropologist Robert Foster investigates the rise of the mobile phone in the South Pacific.

When Robert Foster, a professor of anthropology, went to Papua New Guinea in 2010, he found a familiar place transformed. Everywhere he turned, people had mobile phones.

He'd begun visiting the southern Pacific island country in the 1980s, when he was working on his doctorate at the University of Chicago. Then, telephones were scarce, with long lines at payphones and locks on the rotary phones in government offices.

"Something had happened—and it happened really quickly. It was just in your face, the change was so dramatic," Foster, the Richard L. Turner Professor of Humanities, says. He wanted to know why, and how, and what it means for the culture of Papua New Guinea, or PNG.

He's now in the second year of

a three-year research project, funded by the Australian Research Council, on the moral and cultural economy of the mobile phone in PNG and Fiji. His research partner is Heather Horst, an anthropologist at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University in Australia.

The majority of the world's mobile phones are owned by people in the developing world. That's because it takes only a little bit of money to keep them working on a pay-as-you-go plan. It's the same way electricity and water are typically purchased in developing countries. "People can pay tiny amounts, like 50 cents, to top up their phone credit," Foster says.

He and Horst are gathering primary historical and ethnographic data on information and communication technologies in

two Pacific countries where there has been little empirical research on the subject, especially where it concerns the Internet.

"Like most anthropologists, we're concerned with what people do with new things and how they reconcile them to old ways of doing things and

preexisting cultural values," Foster says. "But unlike a lot of anthropologists, we're very interested in the companies and how they operate."

While Foster is an expert in questions of material culture, globalization, and corporations, he's no technology maven—something

Medium Earth Orbit Satellites

A constellation of 12 satellites owned by O3b Networks provides telecommunications services to remote locations around the world. The first group of O3b satellites was launched in 2013. Service to Papua New Guinea began in 2014.



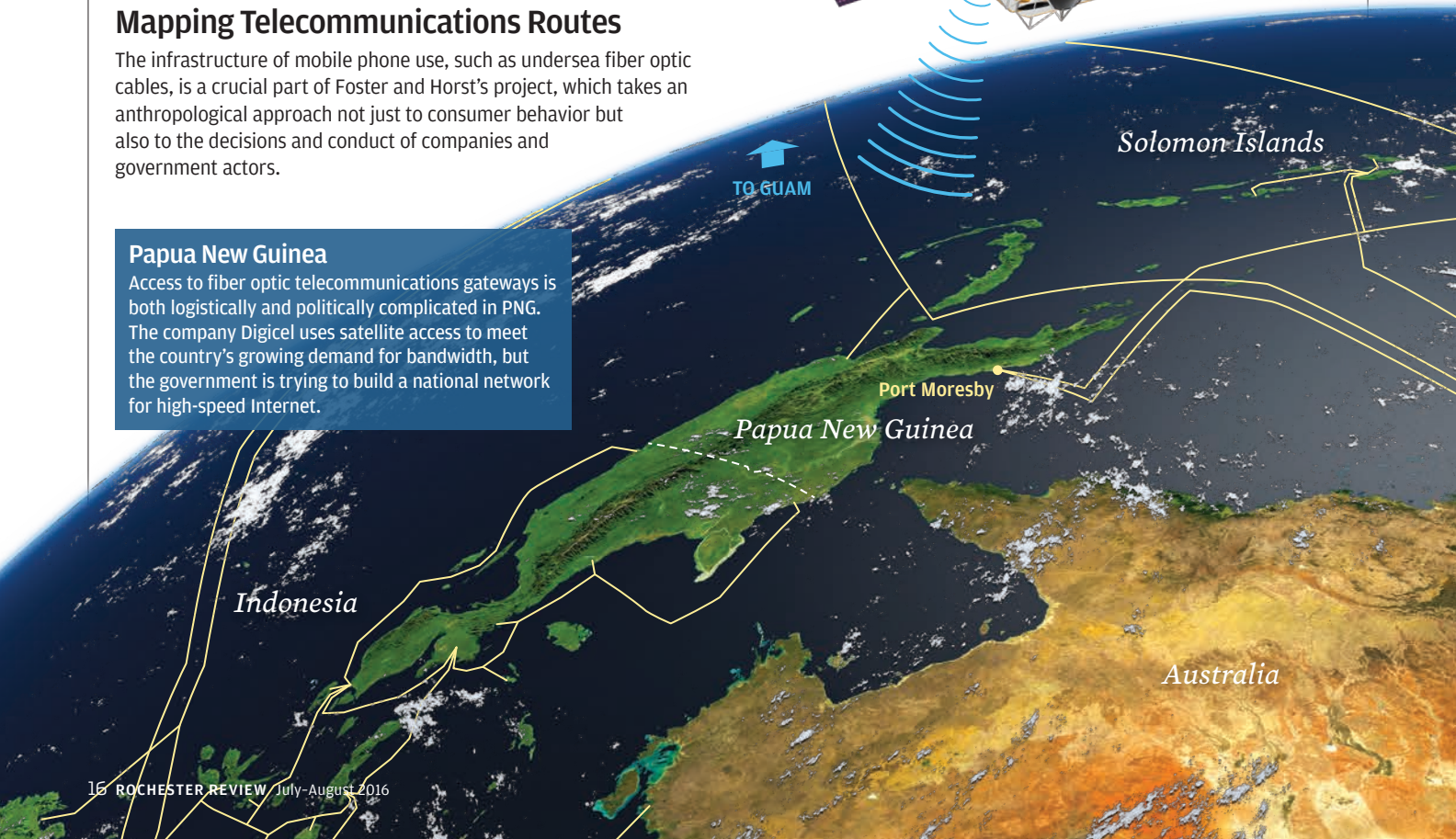
O3b Communications Satellite

Mapping Telecommunications Routes

The infrastructure of mobile phone use, such as undersea fiber optic cables, is a crucial part of Foster and Horst's project, which takes an anthropological approach not just to consumer behavior but also to the decisions and conduct of companies and government actors.

Papua New Guinea

Access to fiber optic telecommunications gateways is both logistically and politically complicated in PNG. The company Digicel uses satellite access to meet the country's growing demand for bandwidth, but the government is trying to build a national network for high-speed Internet.



proven when he pulls out his own battered flip phone. But mobile phones are Horst's specialty.

A decade ago, she cowrote the first book-length anthropological study of mobile phones in the Global South, based on fieldwork she'd done in Jamaica. That's where Digicel, the dominant mobile phone service provider in PNG, is headquartered. Following the company's success in the Caribbean, it began moving into the southern Pacific, carving out a new market in PNG and entering into competition with another company, Vodafone, in Fiji.

In PNG, Digicel has flourished. "They claim that up to 90 percent of the population is covered, which is extraordinary, if you know anything about PNG," says Foster. "The terrain is very rough, and a lot of people live in remote areas." The company built its own infrastructure, installing about 1,100 cell towers.

In investigating the moral economies of mobile phone use in PNG and Fiji, the team is investigating how consumers, companies, and the state discharge—or not—their obligations to each other.

Foster is intrigued by the degree to which phones in PNG are individualized. "One might expect that in these societies, people would share phones—they share lots of other things that we tend to privatize," he says. "But the phones, not so much. The notion that every individual has his or her own phone is one that promotes certain ways of thinking about personhood and identity that aren't always taken for granted in PNG."

Take, for instance, mobile phone accounts. "Prepaid subscriptions force you to monitor your account very carefully," Foster says. And the fact that people can send credit over the phone to someone else's account opens them up to frequent entreaties. "People have to make decisions now about how they're going to respond to a cousin's request for \$5 in air-time credit. What you're seeing is a way of calculating social relations that's not conventional in PNG, where people are almost starting to have to put prices on particular social relations, including kin relations."

In some respects, the phones make people's lives easier. Mobile banking has caught on

in the cities, a response to the daily crowds at the country's banks, the difficulties of travel, and the risk of moving physical money around. But phones are constantly lost or stolen. In interviewing hundreds of people, Foster has met only one who has never experienced the loss of a phone, and that's an impediment, he says, to the possibilities mobile banking offers.

When he and Horst conceived their project, smartphones weren't yet a factor. But their popularity now is forcing the researchers to reimagine their project. What had been a study of a communication device is now research into what happens when people suddenly have handheld computers at the ready.

Horst has prime responsibility for research in Fiji, where government regulations are more extensive than in PNG. For example, SIM cards—the "smart cards" inside a phone—must be registered. Digicel faces greater competition in Fiji, especially from the incumbent company Vodafone, which in 2014 became 100 percent locally owned. A larger middle class also means smartphones have made more inroads there.

Ultimately, Foster says, the team is working to create a

history of the last 10 years. Part of the project involves creating an archive of the advertisements, corporate documents, policy papers, and other artifacts surrounding the advent of the mobile phone in both countries.

"A lot of the stuff is ephemeral. If you're interested in the history of advertising, what are you going to do when newspapers are archived digitally? They take out the ads. So a lot of the material, especially around the moment when Digicel came into Fiji and PNG, has to be tracked down and scanned to be preserved."

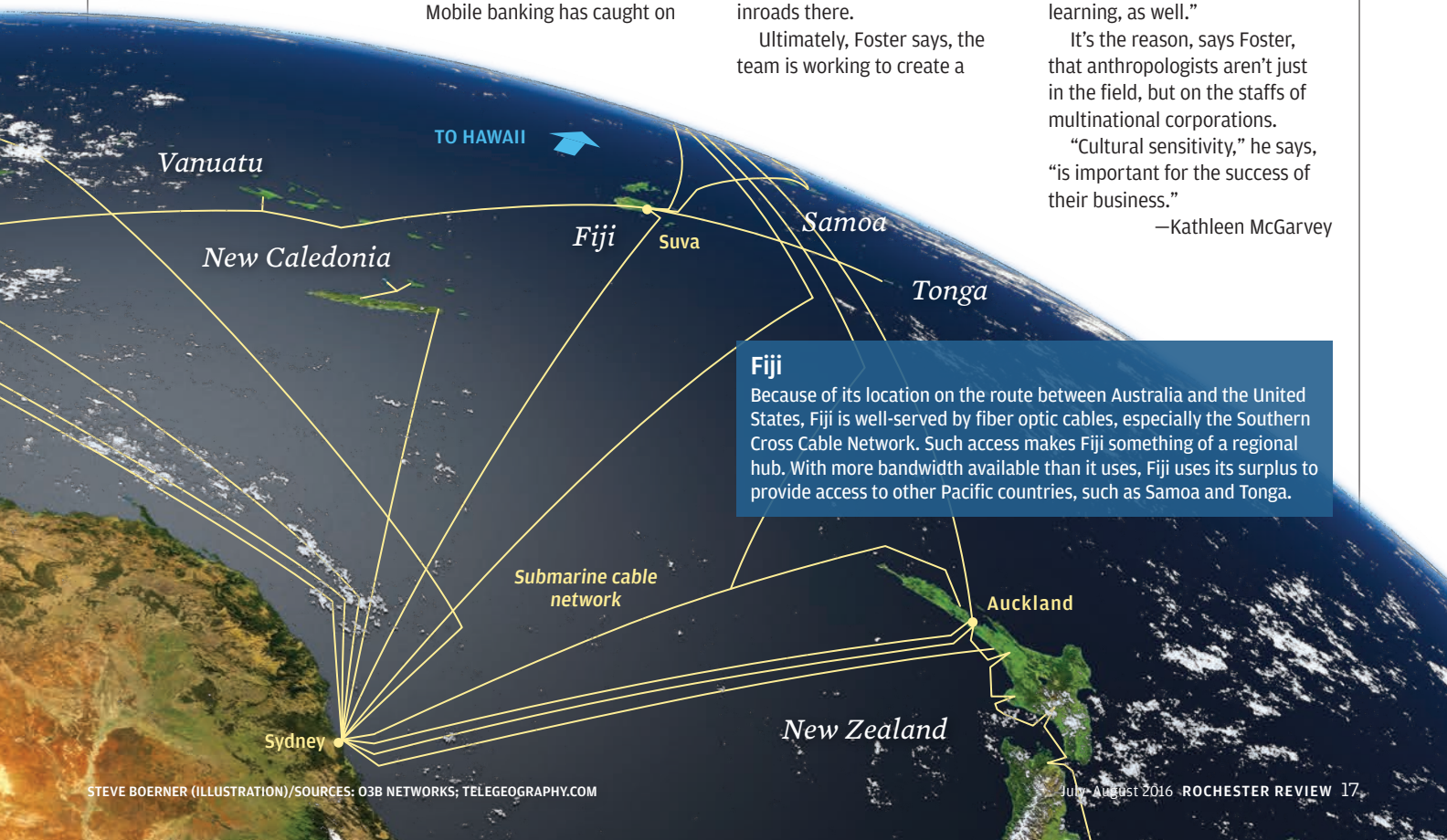
Much of the team's time is spent talking with people, trailing company and government officials, and gathering materials for the archive. They're also examining how the companies have adapted to business in the southern Pacific.

"Consumers look at a technology and say, how are we going to adapt it to our culture? But companies from foreign countries come in and say, all right, how are we going to adapt our marketing, our advertising, and our corporate outreach programs to what local sensibilities are? So they're learning, as well."

It's the reason, says Foster, that anthropologists aren't just in the field, but on the staffs of multinational corporations.

"Cultural sensitivity," he says, "is important for the success of their business."

—Kathleen McGarvey



Fiji

Because of its location on the route between Australia and the United States, Fiji is well-served by fiber optic cables, especially the Southern Cross Cable Network. Such access makes Fiji something of a regional hub. With more bandwidth available than it uses, Fiji uses its surplus to provide access to other Pacific countries, such as Samoa and Tonga.