Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond

Schorch, Philipp, Saxer, Martin, Elders, Marlen

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Introduction

At the end of November 2017, I became interested in a batch of twenty Samsung smartphones auctioned by the National Customs Authority of Bolivia (Aduana Nacional de Bolivia, ANB). They formed part of the customs authority’s fourth internet auction of confiscated contraband. Over a period of three months, 2,240 lots (containing several items each) were sold to the highest bidder in successive individual auctions that lasted six to eight days each (ANB 2017). As I clicked on the slot with the phones, I could access bits of information; a rudimentary picture of each of them could be opened. It showed the phones from the front, turned on so that the Samsung Galaxy J1 Ace name and technical data about the camera, the size and the battery were displayed. The phones were also described as new and manufactured in Vietnam. In contrast to another twenty Galaxy J1s auctioned several days earlier, which I had also followed, this time the phones’ individual international mobile equipment identities (IMEIs) were given. However, when I went to www.samsung.com.bo to test the IMEIs, none of the phones were authorised by Samsung Electronics Bolivia. Although the information and the logo I saw in the pictures indicated original Samsung phones, the IMEIs seemed to contradict that.

This setting of an internet auction is untypical for Bolivia. The situation of individualised, anonymised buyers, and goods that cannot be touched and tested, is in stark contrast to how phones normally change hands in Bolivia, namely through face-to-face interaction, a close look at
the goods, and bargaining. Whereas in the auction phones are presented unpacked, in the market they are offered in brand-named boxes, as this imbues them with quality and authenticity. The peculiar setting of an internet auction changes the commodity situation of the phones. The price-setting process becomes anonymous and competitive (best offer), while the identity of the phones to be purchased is more ambiguous than in Bolivian marketplace exchange, as the commodities are withdrawn from direct contact. The scene also exemplifies the intricacies of commerce in electronic equipment in Bolivia, where traders, customs and manufacturers have multiple agendas and pull the commodities in different directions. While the phones, in this example, were relieved of their status as contraband and temporarily removed from traders’ hands, they remained invisible to the manufacturer as they were ‘parallel imports’ or had not yet been re-registered for the Bolivian market.

In this chapter, I aim to unpack the trajectories and identities of mobile phones as they circulate in Bolivia and beyond, within the environment of the South-Central Andes. Once the phones reach the South and Central American shores at the dockside free-trade zones of the cities of Iquique (northern Chile) and Colón (Panama), they leave the official track. They get diverted as they enter traders’ networks. They are unpacked, re-bundled and disattached from the manufacturers’ databases. Once in Bolivia, the international manufacturers such as Samsung try to regain ownership of the phones by registering and scanning them. I show that Bolivian commerce is constituted by incessant material practices to cut relations of ownership of things in order to build new ones. Traders and manufacturers have different notions about ownership that I will also explore throughout the text. Moreover, the mobility of mobile phones stands out in comparison with that of bulkier electronic equipment; trade in phones has remained small-scale, whereas ovens, stereo systems and large LED televisions are driven in quantity from the Pacific coast towards the highlands and over the Andean plateau. Although nearly all electronic equipment is contraband in Bolivia (contraband tends to be socially legitimate), there is a difference between bulkier things that are increasingly ‘technical contraband’ (moved on false documents and via bribes), and phones that continue to enter entirely ‘black’ (a la negra). In addition, the proliferation of different types and classes of smartphones heightens traders’ combinatory options to mix phones, boxes, accessories and warranties, and create ambiguous identities. Phones are working tools for traders, officers and corporate employees; they are interface devices that connect Bolivian people to the extending broadband network built under the state-centred government
of President Evo Morales. His time in office (2006–19) coincided with a spectacular increase in sales of mobile phones throughout the country and unknown levels of investment from international electronics corporations, especially East Asian multinationals Samsung and Huawei.

In a trading world in which things continually get diverted, manufacturers are forced back towards a historically rooted type of branding. Through this perspective, corporate labelling and scanning is first of all the continuation of a material practice of creating standardised goods and ownership relations through the physical act of leaving a tangible trace on things (nowadays through a hologram or a barcode). Sketching the contours of this type of ‘brand economy’, prevalent in Andean commerce, enables me to address critically certain legal commercial categories and tropes (‘parallel imports’), to think about the multiple mobilising forces beneath the transnational movement of goods, and, in resonance with the conceptual focus of this edited volume, to address phones as devices whose identity, value and ownership are constituted through quarrels over connections and ‘itinerancies’ (Stockhammer, Chapter 2 in this volume).

The chapter is based on long-term, multi-sited fieldwork in Bolivia, Chile and Peru. The description of the phones’ journeys and classifications builds on my own observation and ongoing conversations and interviews with traders, manufacturers’ employees and customs officers. Interviews have also been conducted with distributors in the free-trade zone of Iquique. Through research at the marketing office of Samsung Electronics Bolivia, I was able to tour the La Paz markets with employees, accompanying them in their daily activities and their interactions with traders. I observed and spoke to Bolivian customers of electronic equipment and made a survey in order to assess purchasing practices and vernacular classifications of phones. Throughout my research stay in Bolivia, I was attentive to news and stories about traders, customs and multinational corporations (MNCs) with a view to unbundling the web of trade in electronics.

The social life of things reconsidered

Since the publication of Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things* in 1986, numerous studies have given examples of changes in meaning, commodity status and legal definition as things move through different social ‘contexts’ (Thomas 1991), ‘regimes of value’ (cf. Meyers 2001) and ‘spaces of regulation’ (Schendel and Abraham 2005). The status of a thing as a commodity in market exchange is never a given but must be constructed and maintained by interested parties. From this perspective, mobile phones are ‘commodities
by destination’ (Appadurai 1986, 16), which means that they are manufactured – in the case of the Galaxy J1, in Vietnam – as goods for market exchange. However, the phones are only activated as commodities in certain social settings or ‘social arenas’ (Appadurai 1986, 15). Phones in the hands of customs officers (after confiscation and later in storage in customs warehouses) have had the status of ‘commodity’ temporarily removed.

Seen from a spatial-temporal axis, as things in motion, they have been diverted from the commodity path (Appadurai 1986; Ferguson 1992).

Most diversions of mobile phones and other electronics in Bolivia, however, do not deny their commodity status. The phones are framed, classified and marketed differently in a customs-organised internet auction like the one described above than in a face-to-face exchange situation, and in urban marketplaces differently than at rural fairs, but they are still treated as exchangeable commodities with a market value. So how do we discern the commodity path of mobile phones? I argue that in a world in which the digital economy encounters vast amounts of contraband trade, customs agents become market players, and corporate employees are continuously stamping and scanning things to get an overview of traders’ stocks, diversion of phones from their intended commodity path means that they are disconnected from state and corporate databases. They are temporarily or permanently undocumented. The initial moment of becoming diverted is marked by an act of repackaging that prepares the phones for cross-border movements.

This resonates with modalities of long-distance trade, past and present. To close and seal a package has historically meant to guarantee the quality and quantity of certain things, and to mark ownership; opening a package disrupts this prior relationship of ownership. It potentially influences the transactional properties of the goods (Fanselow 1990). As Bolivian traders master bundling and packaging during the entire journey of the phones and the transactions that follow (between various wholesalers, retailers and final clients), corporate employees interfere through practices of relabelling and registering in order to regain control over the phones. I interpret these acts as material practices of branding.

Etymologically, branding means burning; later it came to mean leaving a visible trace on a thing, on livestock or on a person. It is a physical act of marking something (or somebody). Historically and cross-culturally, branding has been about stamping, burning or engraving a recognisable identity into the materiality of the thing: a name, an acronym or a graphic. This sense differs from what is conventionally seen as branding in entrepreneurial marketing. Large-scale corporations are said to sell an image instead of the material thing, not a product but a brand
that appeals to the customer’s identity and status aspirations (Klein 1999; De Waal Malefyt 2009). Global players like Samsung and Huawei rely on image creation to compete against emerging phone labels that offer practically the same technology at lower prices.

Yet branding is not just about the image. I argue, to the contrary, that branding can be most comprehensively described as a material practice. Archaeological studies share this material culture approach. Histories of commodity branding go far back in time, at least to economic systems that included some form of standardisation of goods and labour (Fanselow 1990; Wengrow 2008). David Wengrow argues that sealing and standardised packaging were central to ‘the emergence of the world’s first large-scale economies’ (Wengrow 2008, 8). This perspective accounts for widespread branding practices in the past and acknowledges that branding is not necessarily a purely capitalist endeavour. It invites us to recognise the existing plurality of commodity branding in the contemporary global economy, and to engage in detailed ethnographies of its materiality (Miller 2008).

This perspective allows me to reframe the analysis of ‘paths and diversions’. These terms, as embedded in Appadurai’s ‘social biography of things’ approach, have mainly been interpreted as spatial-temporally shifting cultural conceptualisations of things, their value and their exchangeability (Appadurai 1986; Ferguson 1992). Relatively little attention has been paid to material traces of former ownership, or material resistances to the change of status and identity (Lowell Gudmundson, cited in Wengrow 2008, 12). In this chapter, I define the physical movements of phones through traders’ networks as diversions from the route laid out by the commodity path. These networks are enacted and maintained through the circulation of things among people (cf. Munn 1983). Put differently, the commodity path is but one ‘itinerancy’ among many, a modality of moving and connecting phones that endangers the ways in which phones are mobilised and classified among traders.

**Telecommunication infrastructure and mobile phones in contemporary Bolivia**

The Bolivian government of President Evo Morales (which came to an end in November, 2019) followed a state-centred policy of resource and infrastructure development. The party, ‘Movement towards Socialism’, which grew out of a convergence of indigenous peasant labour and urban neighbourhood movements against neoliberalism and US interference,
led policies to reconstitute a ‘strong state’ and move beyond ‘colonial
dependence’ (Postero 2016, 141–2). A prime macroeconomic goal was
to become an energy exporter through the industrialisation and commer-
cialisation of hydrocarbons, hydroelectric power and renewable ener-
gies. Large-scale, potentially interconnected material structures were
key issues in reaching this goal. Telecommunication was another prior-
ity. Better and faster telecommunication infrastructure was part of the
government’s political promise to increase people’s access to information
and communication technologies and reduce Bolivia’s ‘digital gap’ with
other countries in the region and the world (CEPAL 2016, 35–6).

Although stark differences between the cities and the countryside
persist, Bolivian people’s increase in internet access via smartphones
has been above the average in the region. The mutually reinforcing
tendencies of infrastructure development and sales of electronic devices
were especially strong, as the country started from lower levels of phone
ownership than the bigger and more urbanised South American econo-
 mies. Sales in broadband-enabled phones have skyrocketed since 2010
because of the transition from 2G to 4G cellular network technology con-
comitant with the growing purchasing power of the population. Bolivia
is among the four Latin American countries with the highest overall
growth rate in internet access between 2010 and 2015, and the coun-
try with the biggest decline in consumer costs (CEPAL 2016, 5–10). At
the end of 2015, 96.7% of all connections in Bolivia were made from
a mobile device, i.e., a smartphone or a tablet (Ortuño Yáñez 2016).
In January 2018, 93% of the Bolivian population above the age of 14
owned a mobile phone, and 92% had cellular network access through a
pre-paid plan (IBCE 2018).

The heightened pace and growing volumes in the electronics trade
constitute profits but also challenges for the manufacturers, above all
Samsung and Huawei. A large number of their phones sold in Bolivia
have remained undocumented. ‘Real’ sales are therefore not reflected
in their databases. Phones are second-hand or ‘parallel imports’; they
change hands outside of any inventory control. This affects national sales
statistics, makes supply chain management more difficult, and, not least,
hinders the promotional hopes of the Bolivian corporate staff.

Diversions

At the moment mobile phones leave the factory of an international cor-
poration, such as Samsung or Huawei, most often located in mainland
China or South-East Asia, they have an unequivocal destination. As my
interlocutors at Samsung formulated it, ‘each country has its portion of the [world] market’. At the factory, the phones are destined for a specific country in Latin America. But the phones are not transported to all these countries directly, especially not to land-locked Bolivia. Instead, the phones for Bolivia are shipped to the port of Iquique, where they are received by a handful of official distributors. These distributing firms, of various sizes and national origins – middle-sized family firms from Chile, merchant migrant businesses from India and Lebanon, US multinational Intcomex Corp. – receive the merchandise and store it at their warehouses in the free-trade zone of the same city of Iquique. Up to this moment, the phones follow the commodity path laid out by the manufacturers. They are properly labelled and packed for Bolivia. A silver hologram tag is attached to the packages, stating ‘Samsung Plus’ and indicating special software for the Bolivian market. In recent years, some models, the Samsung J5 and J8, have arrived in specially designed boxes showing emblematic Bolivian landscapes and folkloric costumes. This is an example of how MNCs market their goods in specific countries. Samsung Bolivia advertised them as specifically made for Bolivia, responding to national feelings about unique Bolivian culture. In the free-trade zone, where Samsung and other manufacturers hold an office to assist and supervise the distributors, the product barcode is added to the boxes. Samsung knows which loads of goods are entering the free zone at what moment, and to which of the distributors, but they lose oversight as they are sold to Bolivian traders and moved towards the Andean high plateau.

Bolivian petty importers and wholesale traders of electronic equipment are typically middle-aged and work as married couples, such as Patricia Choque and Freddy Mamani. I met them at a carnival party where they were more inclined to speak about their business than on a workday, but I also visited them at their stall. They are in their forties and started their family business after marriage. Choque and Mamani specialise in smartphones and tablets. They hold a stall at one of the indoor permanent fairs for phones and tablets, colloquially named warehouses (galpones) because of their spaciousness and wide range of goods. They are located in the popular commercial area of Max Paredes, north-west of the centre of La Paz, in the vicinity of other streets and fairs where electronics are sold. All these markets, a mixture of street trade and permanent fairs with retail shops and galleries, are known by their street names: Buenos Aires, Huyustus and Eloy Salmón. The warehouses, though only rudimentary brick-walled buildings with thin aluminium roofs, are the main regional logistical hub for mobile phones and tablets. They are the place where smuggled phones arrive and are sold to wholesale and retail traders from
surrounding neighbourhoods, to the few high-end retailers from other parts of La Paz, to traders of the nearby city of El Alto, and to traders from other Bolivian provinces and the Peruvian high plains. Phones come and go in all directions. They might be ordered via DHL directly from Miami, where Hispanic resellers offer products not originally destined for South America. Phones might also be imported from the free-trade zone of the port city of Colón (Panama), therefore diverted from their Central American jurisdiction and brought into Bolivia via Peru. At the free-trade zone in Iquique, right next to the official distributors and the multinational offices, unauthorised resellers are also offering ‘parallel imports’ which they have previously imported from elsewhere in Latin America, the USA, the Arab world or Asia.

In Bolivia, this technical term (parallel imports) gets vernacularised as ‘parallel products’, products that do not represent sales and fail to generate the numbers necessary for the manufacturers’ analysis of ‘real’ commercial movements to and in Bolivia. Yet these multiple diversions of phones exceed the notion of ‘parallel imports’ and, as I argue, cannot be adequately captured by the conventional term of grey market goods. This latter term is used internationally to define things outside the trade channels authorised by the manufacturers as intellectual property right owners (INTA 2015). According to this definition, all goods that have passed through the hands of one of the official distributors at one of the free-trade zones or in Miami should be authorised. ‘Parallel imports’, in contrast, refers to the circulation of trademark-protected commodities outside authorised geographic units – Iquique-bought phones for Bolivia ending up in the city of Juliaca in highland Peru, for example. In Latin America, however, as in the majority of regions and countries worldwide, parallel imports are not prohibited by state law unless the products have been modified or damaged – in other words, unless they are ‘materially different’ (INTA 2015, 2). Latin American countries apply ‘international exhaustion of rights’, which means that once the manufacturer has put the commodities on the market in any country, the company loses its trademark rights over the goods everywhere else in the world (INTA 2015, 2). Accordingly, traders’ practices are not illegal except under private commercial law.

But, how can these phones reasonably be named ‘parallel imports’ in the first place? The term evokes the image of two lineal movements of things that never cross, that keep the same distance between them. In the Andes, as elsewhere, there are no ‘straight’ channels that can be kept separate from other trading networks; routes constantly cross each other; phones follow the commodity path laid out by the manufacturers
but get diverted at some point. ‘Parallel imports’ also implies that there are authorised distributors in the country, who secure quality standards and warranties, whereas unauthorised sellers do not (INTA 2015). In highland Bolivia there are hardly any large department stores that sell smartphones. The three telecommunication companies operating in the country (state-owned Entel, and the multinationals Tigo and Viva) started to sell phones a few years ago, but do so only seasonally, and exclusively to customers who get into a contractual relationship with them, something very few Bolivians do as everybody uses pre-paid plans.

Moreover, the practices that sustain ‘parallel imports’ in the Andes are not just isolated acts of marginal traders that arbitrage between different price levels in neighbouring countries with a limited amount of goods (INTA 2015). Rather, the misrecognition of private regulations of intellectual property owners is one of the founding pillars of the vitality of trans-Andean commerce. Traders make use of different currency values and fluctuating exchange rates, but in addition engage in economies of scale as they trade beyond the borders of relatively small national markets; mobility is a strategy to broaden their base of clients and suppliers. Popular importers and wholesalers rely on the fiscal exemptions and massive offers in the free-trade zones. Many usually buy in Iquique, but if a Colón or Miami-based distributor calls and makes a good offer, phones and other equipment are ordered and brought over from these places further away. Not least, traders do not consider their commodities to be parallel or secondary. They claim ownership of, and authority over, the goods that they have purchased lawfully.

Journey 1

Whereas Mrs Choque manages the business at the warehouses and relations with customers and manufacturers, Mr Mamani travels to the free zone of Iquique once a week. He buys phones tax- and duty-free from the mainly Chilean, East and South Asian and Arab resellers and distributors based in the free zone. After purchase, Mamani has to unpack the phones to bring them to Bolivia. Phones, boxes and accessories are sent separately. Repackaging is first of all about wrapping and bundling things for transport and border crossing. But it is also an ownership claim. Mr Mamani has bought the phones, and from now on he and his wife decide how to handle and transport the phones, and to dismantle and reassemble them if necessary. They have the conviction that it is their right to decide how, when and where to sell their merchandise. ‘You sell what
you want,’ as Mrs Choque decisively exclaimed in my presence. ‘This is what we defend; this is the free market.’

After purchase, Mr Mamani decides about logistics and how to transport the phones. He usually gives phones, boxes and accessories to different piloteros (‘pilots’), truck drivers and other carriers of things to be brought over the Chilean–Bolivian border. These are Bolivian co-nationals who hide them between more bulky merchandise or carry phones on their bodies and in bags and suitcases. Packages, for example, are bundled in robust black plastic bags that are used to carry tools
and food bought and sold loose. Mamani also carries some phones with him on his way back on the bus to La Paz, a journey that takes 10–12 hours and ascends more than 4,000 metres in elevation. He normally travels between Thursday night and Saturday evening, when the customs officers are said to be more relaxed, and because of a fortnightly cross-border fair celebrated in the early hours of Friday and Saturday at the border town of Pisiga, between Chile and Bolivia. In the early morning when the fair is on, the movement of goods and people is so incessant that he and his bags full of the newest mobile phones go unnoticed. His merchandise reaches La Paz the same Saturday. He and his wife arrange the delivery of phones, boxes and accessories, reassemble some at their home or warehouse and leave those that had been pre-ordered disassembled.

Traders who pre-order phones often come from Peru. The phones are not necessarily sold in Bolivia. The petty traders I approached at a permanent indoor fair in the Peruvian city of Juliaca close to the shores of Lake Titicaca, four hours from the Bolivian border and eight hours from La Paz, had all bought their merchandise from Bolivian wholesalers in the Max Paredes area, such as Quispe and Mamani. The vendors affirmed that this was more feasible for their small-scale business than ordering from distributors based at coastal Lima. Many of these highland Peruvian traders travel to La Paz every week or two and bring small numbers of mobile phones across the border. Again, phones, packages and accessories are transported separately and then reassembled. At one of the stalls in Juliaca, a Galaxy J5 package with Bolivian folklore costumes was visibly displayed. It became clear to me that at this point the J5 phone had been ultimately disconnected from the commodity path. It had entered what Samsung Electronics Bolivia considers a different jurisdiction. Although transacted on wholesale markets in La Paz, it had not entered the databases of Samsung’s national office. It had remained out of inventory control and was an example of a phone whose barcode, attached in Iquique to register sales in Bolivia, ‘had been lost’, as my Samsung interlocutors expressed it. This J5 was one of the products that, as corporate employees also say, ‘escaped’. Others ‘go away’ to Argentina. Still, ever more phones are actually registered and sold to final clients in Bolivia, a process incentivised by the manufacturers’ national offices.
Branding

Journey 2

Those phones that Choque and Mamani reassemble at their home or warehouse are individually boxed in their package, ready for the next Monday, when corporate employees tour the markets of Buenos Aires, Huyustus and Eloy Salmón to oversee and register new merchandise. Mrs Choque is regularly visited by a Samsung ‘chain specialist’ who re-registers her phones with the corporation. At that point, the adventurous journey of the phones has hardly left any visible traces despite the fact that boxes have been opened and might show some small damage.

In Bolivia, as described above, where neither logistics nor market transactions are managed or overseen by the manufacturers, corporate employees tour the market daily to get access to information on stocks, prices and customers’ preferences. They engage in small talk, visit the same traders again and again to comment on the ups and downs of supply and demand, and do quasi-ethnographic surveys. In 2017, 29 people worked for Samsung Electronics in this area of La Paz alone. The official technical service subcontracted by the multinational had no more than five technicians. This shows that access to information on transactions and stocks is the top priority behind Samsung’s policies and the new category of the ‘homologised’ phone (see below).

In order to register products upon their arrival in La Paz, corporate channel specialists enter traders’ warehouses and put an official stamp, ‘Samsung Bolivia’, on the warranties. Only through this stamp is the warranty activated for Bolivia. Employees attach a barcode to the packages even though they already carry the product barcode attached in Iquique. This new barcode serves two purposes: first, it identifies and registers those phones destined for Bolivia that actually entered the Bolivian market; second, it enables their further itinerancy to be traced. Samsung wants to know if a phone will really be sold retail in Bolivia, to whom and when. Thus, the second barcode is detached from the product and withdrawn by the vendor upon the sales transaction. As soon as the vendor hands their physical list of barcodes over to Samsung, normally once a week, they get a bonus payment. If traders use the maximum barcodes given to them per week, 200 for phones in 2017, the bonus payments can add up to significant amounts of extra income. In the premium category, including the newest smartphones, the bonus is 4–5% of the sale price for each phone. Once the list is handed in to Samsung and the barcode scanned, information on the phones’ date of arrival in the market and
date of sale is in Samsung’s inventory databases. The first barcode from Iquique has not been ‘lost’ but reactivated and reaffirmed through another one. Through these successive material branding practices, the phone has changed its classification. It is now not just an authentic brand-name phone, but ‘homologised’ for the Bolivian market.

**Mobile classifications**

People in Bolivia make a basic distinction in electronic equipment between an *original* (‘original’) and a *chino* (‘Chinese’). This classification is heard again and again at the marketplaces and in everyday conversation. You buy a brand-name phone from Samsung, Huawei, Sony, LG or the like, or a *chino*, which can mean a ‘fake’ (*trucho*), a clone (*clonado*) or an unknown Chinese label. In fact, however, vendors might offer you a ‘half-original, half-Chinese’. ‘Clones’ are rather easy to identify, but these hybrids are not. The proliferation of new models, and the multiple ways of modifying phones so that they are slightly ‘fake’, mean that detection is not an easy task even for urban, more experienced buyers. ‘Refurbished’ phones, where certain parts are taken out, changed and rearranged, are being sold as new.

According to my observations, conversations with customers and the survey I conducted, clients overwhelmingly trust in the veracity of the vendor’s explanation and the shop’s reputation. Traders decorate their shops and stalls with the logos of the brand-name companies to convey authenticity. During sales transactions, they stress that their products are original and offer some reliability in the form of their own warranties of several months to a year. Many shops and even stalls have a personalised repair service which they subcontract to local workshops. For customers, the most common way to assess the status of an original on the spot is to touch the phone, switch it on to check the software, and check the package. One visible difference between the half-and-half, refurbished or simple second-hand phones and the original ones is that the originals have a package that matches them, while the others have not. Only very few customers, however, compare the IMEI of the package with the IMEI of the phone. Vendors think that the majority of clients just do not know about IMEIs and technical issues. Moreover, as I experienced myself when I was looking for a new phone, verifying the IMEI questions the trustworthiness of the vendor, might be answered with suspicion, and potentially harms the vendor–buyer relationship. A vendor at a tiny stall in the entrance of one of the commercial galleries in the retail
area Eloy Salmón got annoyed when I insisted on comparing the IMEI of the Samsung J5 that he offered me with the IMEI of the box. Another seller in the same gallery, in contrast, offered me an LG phone with ‘real warranty’. She stressed, ‘Look, it says so on the silver sticker attached to the box.’ Whereas the man had most likely offered me a ‘parallel product’, she had offered me a ‘homologado’.

In recent years, another distinction has become prominent, introduced by the manufacturers, that between original and ‘homologado’ (‘homologised’). The abovementioned traders Choque and Mamani stress that they sell phones ‘for all kinds of pockets’ (‘todos los bolsillos’). They emphasise that they serve people with different economic possibilities as they sell ‘Samsung and Huawei homologised and chinos’. The phones and tablets from Samsung and Huawei they sell are nearly all homologised as ‘these are what people ask for’. Although the homologised ones are not technically better in any way than the originals – both types are technically unaltered brand-named phones – homologised have become popular among urban middle- and upper-class Bolivians since 2016. They cost $10–20 more than simple originals. For this higher price, customers receive an effective manufacturer’s warranty in Bolivia, special sales and entertainment offers and preferential treatment. All these extra services can be offered because homologised phones are re-registered with the company.

Clients face similar challenges in identifying a homologised rather than a simple original phone. During sales transactions, they continue to rely on the word and responsibility of the vendors. Some additionally look for the stamp on the warranty and switch the phone on to make sure the software application ‘Samsung Plus’ is installed. It is only after purchase that they eventually approach Samsung’s showroom, where employees check the so-called ‘software code’ that verifies whether the phone was originally destined for Bolivia. This software code is the most recent invention for identifying phones destined for Bolivia, as IMEIs are too often forged and ‘cloned’. Information about this national code, and how to access it in the software, seems to be kept secret; even traders do not know about it. Vis-à-vis the vendors and the final clients, the manufacturer insists that the hologram on the package should be used to distinguish homologised phones. The silver glittering hologram is considered to be very difficult to copy. It has already been attached to the boxes at the factories in Asia. As the number of hologram-stamped boxes is therefore limited, possibilities for ambiguous mixings of boxes and phones become more limited. In a series of newspaper advertisements for the new Galaxy S8 and Galaxy S8+ in August 2017, Bolivians were encouraged to ‘Search
for the hologram’ in order to identify ‘Samsung Plus Original!’ In sum, the package, although incessantly treated by traders, continues to imbue phones with official authority, and is a corporate ownership claim against traders’ handling and manipulation of the boxes.

Conclusion

In the South-Central Andean Highlands, mobile phones are incessantly moving through the myriad networks of small-scale traders and drivers. These journeys ignore the jurisdictions of both nation-states and multinational corporations, and usually remain outside of customs control and corporate oversight. Even if phones get confiscated, they remain invisible to the manufacturers; those phones classified as homologised are hardly ever taxed, no duties have been paid, no sales taxes are added. Trans-Andean trade in mobile phones is made up of trading routes and practices that defy nation-state borders and fiscal regimes, as well as corporate private law concerning ‘grey market goods’ and ‘parallel imports’. In Bolivia, where sales in mobile phones have increased enormously since 2010, corporate employees’ ambitions and MNCs’ international standards are being challenged. ‘Parallel imports’ are troublesome, not because they
offer lower quality or are potentially harmful, but because they are out of
corporate logistics and sales control. As traders contest manufacturers’
jurisdictions, they continue to freely handle, transport and sell brand-
name phones, and demand economic compensations if they adhere to
the manufacturers’ wishes.

The multiple diversions that phones take on their way from the fac-
tory to the market disattach them from the commodity path envisioned
by the manufacturers. The routes the phones take across the Andes leave
intangible, yet relevant, traces. They are classified differently according
to the journey that they undergo. The same objects made in the same fac-
tory at the same time are sold as different phones according to the route
they take towards the Bolivian market. Their movement through space
alters their market value. If the Samsung Galaxy J1 travels from Vietnam
to Iquique through the hands of the authorised distributors and then
across the border to the warehouses in La Paz to be registered, it becomes
a homologised phone. If the same phone continues to be diverted upon
arrival in Bolivia to be sold in Juliaca, it remains a simple original. A J1
brought to Bolivia from Colón cannot be homologised even though it is
sold in La Paz close to the manufacturer’s gaze. Mobile phones are put
in different product categories according to their ‘itinerancies’ in Latin
America and the Andes.

The effectiveness of these paths and diversions, the continuous
change of status and ownership of phones, depends on physical acts of
branding. Thinking through phones’ mobility and connectivity has ena-
bled me to develop an understanding of branding as a material practice.
Whereas traders’ acts of de- and repackaging phones cut prior relations
of ownership, the manufacturers aim at regaining inventory control
through relabelling and scanning. Labels and codes are more effectively
attached to the boxes on a plastic tag than inscribed into the phones’ soft-
ware. The plastic sticker with the hologram – like the new-old brand in
its high-tech, optical form evoking three-dimensionality – acquires a seal-
like quality in a contraband economy in which boxes have always been
already opened. The hologram is an attempt to accomplish a standard-
isation process, and an ownership claim, that is notoriously unstable in
Andean commerce.

Likewise, the barcode, standardised under the ISO-normed Universal
Product Code (UPC), is, in this sense, a commercial stamp of digital capital-
ism that continues to rely on material connections, while being deployed
as a socio-technological device for supply-chain management (Tsing
2015). As highlighted by global commodity-chain analysis (GCC) (Bair
2005), control over the distribution of consumer goods from production
sites in Asia to markets worldwide is increasingly exercised by the manufacturers and mass retailers. A trading environment in which goods continually enter and leave the status of ‘legible inventory’ (Tsing, 2015, 70) exposes the tension over logistics and distribution that emerges at the interface of big corporations and other market agents. In Bolivia, where categories of ‘parallel imports’ make little sense (as literally all the phones in the market are purchased at best offer from various free-trade zones in the region and moved as contraband over a rough mountain range and a vast plateau), phones are hardly ever ‘pacified’ (Çalişkan and Callon 2010) in the sense of being ultimately standardised, qualified, priced, and disconnected from existing networks. Certainly, phones are high-tech commodities produced from materials (precious metals, rare earths, etc.) that have often been violently disentangled from their primary environments. Yet, as they move over long distances, across seas and mountains, being variously labelled, boxed and diverted in the process, mobile phones show their Janus-headed potentiality to connect. As technological devices, they connect traders with other commercial agents, clients, telecommunication infrastructures and databases. As material entities, phones are always on the verge of ‘escaping’; they are pushed and pulled in different directions through acts of branding and rebranding. The directionality and speed of the phones’ movements and their transactional value are facilitated and constrained by material practices – the recombination of phones, boxes and warranties, as well as the attaching and detaching of labels and holograms. As long as mobile phones continue to be repackaged and relabelled on their way to the market, and eventually be disconnected from digital databases to be related and classified differently, trading worlds are kept open and plural.

Notes

1. Throughout the text, when I refer to Samsung I mean the South Korean multinational electronics corporation of that name, but indirectly also the other international manufacturers that are branding their phones in Bolivia, namely Chinese Huawei, Korean LG and Japanese Sony. Samsung is the company that is investing most in Bolivia’s popular markets, but the others do similar things, only on a smaller scale, with fewer employees and a smaller budget. The manufacturers copy each other’s strategies. Actually, Huawei claims that the ‘homologised’ category is its invention. Therefore, Samsung started its ‘plus’ label. Customers refer to all original products with an official warranty for Bolivia indiscriminately as homologados, a practice I have taken up in this chapter.

2. Some confiscated things remain de-commodified. Laptops, printers, cameras and DVD players have been distributed to rural peasant and indigenous organisations loyal to the government within the so-called Pact of Unity (Página Siete, 6 April 2016, http://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2016/4/6/gobierno-repartio-afines-mercaderia-incautada-aduana-92315.html, accessed 31 December 2017). Sometimes, customs controls in border areas lead to the burning of entire truckloads, as traders and drivers destroy merchandise rather than hand it over to the officers, a telling practice with regard to the claim of ownership.
3. Despite a spectacular decrease in prices, Bolivia is still the most expensive country in the region in terms of the cost of internet access in relation to average salaries (CEPAL 2016, 21). By the end of 2018, it is estimated that 67.5% of Bolivians will have stable internet access, which is slightly above the Latin American average (Internet World Stats 2018, last modified 13 February 2018, https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats10.htm (accessed 3 October 2019)).

4. People notice differences in overall quality, software, touch, memory, and casing. Also, phones with space for two SIM cards are deemed to be Chinese.

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