Mobile republic: Visual approaches to discourse in South African mobile social networks

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A new generation of South African Internet users network online via net-enabled phones. Despite limitations, mobile-centric internet allows connections with broader mediated publics. Mobile networking (both public and intimate) has the potential to reshape South African public discourse and change the social fabric, but social and economic divisions mean that mobile social interactions are currently almost entirely digitally invisible. Visualisations of social networks and the mobile Internet are presented to suggest some of the mediated conversations and networking taking place in the social networks of the majority.

Social networks are believed to broaden participation and deepen democracy, but may play a role in reproducing social divisions. As online networks grow, they come to serve distinct, loosely circumscribed communities (lemonde.fr, 2008). In countries with widespread internet access, social network sites, like other neighbourhoods, develop in ways that recreate race and class divisions (boyd, 2009). While differences arise through everyday practices of ‘homophily’ (boyd, 2009) overt discrimination is also practiced. For example, some global social networks see users from developing countries as a liability. Because these users ‘eat’ bandwidth and storage space without attracting advertising, they sometimes receive differential treatment (Stone and Helft, 2009).

This paper focuses on another set of differences -- those between computer users, whose social network use constitutes a form of mediated public, and mobile-centric users (Donner and Gitau, 2009) who primarily access the Internet via their phones, and whose contributions often remain digitally invisible. While Twitter and Facebook serve comparatively wealthy computer users who also use their mobile phones to access social network sites, mobile social networks serve a growing number of people with limited or no access to computers, who use their mobile phones as a primary form of Internet access. Differences in platform thus inscribe race, class, urban-rural and national divisions.

Mobile republic

In South Africa, landlines and computer-based Internet access are the preserve of a small monied elite. The exclusivity of computer-based social networking becomes apparent when we consider that, of 48 million South Africans, just over 1.9 million used Facebook (CheckFacebook.com, 21 September 2009). Most Facebook users are likely to be far more tightly connected with other members of the global elite on their Facebook ‘friends list’ than with their impoverished fellow-citizens. In contrast, for many young residents of the urban townships of South Africa, the Internet is most accessible via a mobile phone, and while many may have heard of Facebook, they are currently more likely to use other Internet-based social networks such as MXit (Donner and Gitau, 2009, Kreutzer, 2009). MXit is a low cost mobile instant messaging (IM) application, and company representatives claim 15 million registered users, 13 million of whom are South African (Laura Hallam, 2009, personal communication, 14 August).

Mobile applications such as MXit have played a crucial role in extending access to the Internet, but, from the perspective of communication rights, they can also be seen as the ‘second-class carriages’
of online communication. While MXit and its competitors (e.g. Mig33, 2Go, The Grid) have made affordable mobile communication accessible to millions, the lower social status of mobile-centric users is reflected in the relative invisibility of their conversations.

On MXit and other South African mobile social networking and instant messaging services, transient mobile chats and IM sessions are not archived, aggregated, or searchable. These functions are expensive and, moreover, are difficult to deliver to users who rely on small screens and expensive prepaid airtime, and who consume bandwidth by the droplet. With some notable exceptions, such as The Grid, mobile discourse is thus effectively rendered digitally invisible and seldom makes its way into the broader public sphere or the networked archive. Content and conversations hosted by mobile-centric social networks are not linked to elite social networks, nor are they archived in search engine indexes, and they are also not taken into account by social ranking, recommendation and bookmarking systems. While this is not necessarily only a negative trend (since visibility brings with it issues of privacy and surveillance) it is nonetheless worthy of investigation. This paper explores visual methods of putting mobile-mediated discourse in South Africa on the record.

Public Sphere: South Africans talking politics

In South Africa, mobile Internet access is primarily associated with IM (via MXit) as a variant of texting. Although MXit is used to transfer pictures and to download music, the data costs of transferring images and audio across the network can be prohibitive for low income users. The comparative affordability and accessibility of text communication means that huge volumes of text are generated every day (MXit reports that its users send each other some 250 million messages per day).

During the 2009 South African national elections, many citizens participated in online debates and political meetings via their mobile phones (Walton and Donner, 2009). Unlike the 2009 Iran elections, where social media communicated the crisis to a global public, the transient conversations of mobile using South African voters took place in read-write-erase mode, and there is almost no record of their participation.

Illustration 1, ‘Public Sphere’, is generated from a sequence of 115 lines of chat from a mobile chatroom on Mig33, as logged during a debate between supporters of opposing political parties, shortly before the final results of the 2009 election became available. Cohesive structures in the chatlog were tagged and word frequencies within the argument were used to visualise the argument structure, as a Wordle (www.wordle.net) digital collage. The visualisation highlights (and emphasizes) the coherence of political discourse and powerful levels of engagement in the democratic process which took place in such mobile spaces, despite their digital invisibility to broader publics.
Social Fabric: Seeing ‘race’ in social networking

Illustration 2: ‘Social Fabric’ - racial categorisations and social networking in 120 MXit personal advertisements

Mobile communication by phonecall or SMS often reinforces strong ties, by facilitating communication between close friends (Ling, 2007). In contexts where people gain access to the internet via their phones, this small circle can expand dramatically. Applications like MXit are not simply social networks, which connect people already known to one another, but are also used for social networking, where people use the Internet to make new contacts.

South African social networks are characterised by deep ethnic divisions, entrenched after centuries of colonial rule and four decades of apartheid, when even intimate sexual, marital and familial connections were legislated by overtly racist apartheid laws such as the Immorality Act and the Group Areas Act.

In these social networks, strong ties seldom cross racial divides. Despite fifteen years of democracy and a public commitment to non-racialism, categorisation by ‘race’, or ethnic identity is still commonplace. MXit and other mobile social networks allow South Africans to expand their social networks, in many cases by making anonymous connections with others in mobile chatrooms, or, more recently, via MXchange (a mobile eBay with personal ads). Racial thinking also prevails online, as is evident from the way MXit users decide whether to establish friendly or intimate relations with others in chatrooms. In the absence of pictures, the usual abrupt chatroom greeting is a variant on the global ASL (‘what is your age, sex, location’). In South Africa this becomes ‘ASLR’ (‘what is your age, sex, location, race’) (Bosch, 2008). This practice persists in the MXchange personals, where advertisers offer information about their own racial identities, and demand specific racial identities from their prospective mates. Illustration 2, ‘Social Fabric’, visualises race and gender in 120 personals ad posted to MXit on a particular day, representing desired social connections as two adjacent graphs (the right graph for men’s personals, and the left for women’s personals).

The MXchange data suggests that some South Africans may be engaging in slightly less explicitly racialised relationships. Almost half of the personal ads did not specify the advertiser’s own ethnic identity (indicated by the red triangles). Nonetheless, the white, green, yellow, and black shapes code apartheid racial categories, indicating that old practices and hierarchies of racial categorisation still play an important role in weaving new social networks. The asymmetries between the left and right graphs also allude to complex gendered differences in the practices of social networking, desire, and courtship.

‘Social Fabric’ makes public taboo issues of race and intimacy and points to the intransigence of racial thinking, while trying not to reinforce apartheid categories. It highlights continuities and breaks with past social categorisation practices by translating racial and gender categories into visual
form, adopting a traditional South African visual language used to communicate about courtship, and to break taboos that enforce silence in relation to gender and sexuality (Schoeman, 1983; Wells, Sienaert and Connolly, 2004).

Conclusion
This paper focuses on the consequences of digital invisibility for public discourse and the relationship between private expression and public spheres. Visual approaches to discourse analysis can help researchers formulate new approaches to dealing with the vast quantities of textual communication generated every day on mobile platforms. Should aggregation of mobile user generated content become available to mobile Internet users in future, such visual representations may help to address digital invisibility, and, on newer generations of phones, they might have the potential to be used as social interfaces, or as mementos or barometers of mobile public discourse. Digital ‘invisibility’, while not entirely negative, does limit ordinary people’s ability to influence public agendas, and to make potentially important connections (whether intimate, personal, professional or civic in nature) with people outside their immediate environment. Mobile networks are currently not designed to make these connections, and this project shows some ways in which mobile users are attempting to make them. The current absence of such mobile users from elite networks and aggregators is a highly significant silence.

References