

Marion Walton (za)

University of Cape Town
Centre for Film and Media Studies
Lecturer
the.marion.walton@gmail.com

**Mobile Republic:
Visual Approaches to
Discourse in South African
Mobile Social Networks**

Social networks are believed to broaden participation and deepen democracy, but may play a role in reproducing social divisions. This project highlights the differences 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. 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, and who often do not use the platforms popular among computer-users. Differences in platform thus inscribe race, class, urban-rural and national divisions.

Mobile republic

In South Africa, landlines and computer-based Internet access have been the preserve of a small monied elite. Computer-based social networks (such as Facebook or Twitter) serve only an influential 4% of the population. In contrast, for many young residents of the urban townships of South Africa, the Internet is most accessible via a mobile phone. While many may have heard of Facebook, they are currently more likely to use other Internet-based social networks such as MXit, a low cost mobile instant messaging (IM) application which claims 15 million registered users in South Africa.

While MXit and its competitors (e.g. Mig33, 2Go) 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. From the perspective of public communication, they can also be seen as the 'second-class carriages' of online communication.

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. Much 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. This is not necessarily only a negative trend (since visibility brings with it issues of privacy and surveillance). While Facebook users are concerned about the erosion of their privacy, mobile-mediated discourse is erased from the public record.



Fig. 1: Social distance in geocoded images of Guguletu

Public Sphere: South Africans talking politics

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 the powerful engagement in the democratic process which took place in such mobile spaces.

Social Fabric: 'race' in social networking

Applications such as 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 the absence of pictures, the usual abrupt chatroom greeting on Mxit is a variant on the global ASL ('what is your age, sex, location'), becoming 'ASLR' ('what is your age, sex, location, race') on MXit (Bosch, 2008). 'Social Fabric' visualises race and gender in personals ads posted to MXit and points to the intransigence of racial thinking.

Social distancing in mobile and digital photography

Access inequalities mean that tourist images of marginal regions currently dominate social aggregators. Figure 1 shows how geocoded tourist photos posted from Guguletu to Flickr favour impersonal distances in choices of shot scale, while photos posted from the same area to local mobile platform The Grid are personal and intimate.

Conclusion

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 significant silence.

References

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