Prepaid publics and the mobile internet in South Africa: Patterns in young people’s political discourse

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Prepaid/feature phone Apps

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Understanding prepaid publics

- Prepaid billing on mobile networks

Inequalities:

- Intermittent access “The week goes by without airtime”
- Prepaid politics – let the poorest pay the most per bit!
Understanding prepaid publics

Unpacking ‘the mobile phone’ and activism – role of feature phones & prepaid access.

Inequalities:

- Beyond the handset - how does mobile discourse enter public domain? Journalists only love Twitter not MXit
- Systemic bias of feedback loops for filtering, amplification, crowdsourced leadership
Mxit vs Facebook vs Twitter in South Africa

- Mxit: 10 000 000
- Facebook: 3 761 160
- Twitter (approx.): 800 000

More coolness? #Odmact
afrographique.tumblr.com
Youth politics & mobile participation

Unpacking ‘the mobile phone’ and activism

Youth politics in South(ern) Africa & mobile political participation.

- ‘Time bomb’, unemployment, failing school system
Youth politics & mobile participation

Unpacking ‘the mobile phone’ and activism

2007-9 – ANCYL and Julius Malema as king makers for Jacob Zuma, mobile used to mobilise ‘footsoldiers’

- Malema used “like a condom” and then expelled,
- Squashed campaign: BBM – Bring back Malema
- Media fail to amplify grassroots youth voices
• Mediated publics (boyd 2007)
• Tunisia, Egypt vs Swaziland
Walled garden
SA election, April 2009
Mxit bans political campaigning
No user-created chatrooms
ANCYL activists decamp briefly to Mig33
gatineau: Me a kwerekwere
hotttt_lipz: Cant wait 2 v0te😊 my 1st time
ndoda4u: Mva
ANC National 2: yayiro has left
ANC National 2: choc20 has entered
ANC National 2: femalegod has left
phumilove: nah! h8 him wit a passion
ANC National 2: ladyfair.aura has entered
aver-d: Cant wait 2 vote ANC
mb0ngwa: we dnt wnt cope here phumi its business nt personal love
hotttt_lipz: No matter hw many c0rruption charges he myt hav..
ladyfair.aura: Vote anC ANC ANC ANC
gatineau: What hot
angelgreen: Mva Cope 4 Hope A.peace loving .Corruptless New SA❤️
ANC National 2: keke-fs has left
ANC National 2: k.a.k has entered
ANC National 2: handsome___ has entered
boi2melo.dpc: 1st time nd u ganna vote ANC neh
Digital invisibility

- The rich intertextual discussions on Mig33 suggest various ways in which political talk references oral genres, displays typical characteristics of synchronous CMC and contains intertextual references to contemporary broadcast media and public figures.

- Neither Mig33 nor MXit allow linking to the broader web, or publication of arguments and debates in some form of user generated content.

- No journalists refer to debates

- No ‘crowdsourced’ leaders emerge this way
2009-2012
Political parties adopt FB 2012 – branches, official and unofficial pages and groups
FutureLeader & CdeJimmy (COSAS activists from small town in Limpopo province)
Mxit debates - Although Facebook was also used, MXit was preferred ‘most cdes are there’.
Organisational personas and imagery in MXit profiles,
Imagery sourced w browser on Nokia XPressMusic phone
Frequently updated to reflect organisational agenda – Youth Day, Mandela Day etc.
Multimedia participation and Zuma’s spear
Where are the mobile links on FB?

Table 1: Link vs Platform in public Facebook status updates mentioning 'Zuma spear'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mobile</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Link</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>No link</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>32.4%</td>
<td>16.6%</td>
<td>49.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>147</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35.9%</td>
<td>64.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

410 Facebook status updates (matching "zuma spear" 17-28 May 2012)
Zuma spear – limited mobile linking
How can mobile participation be reflected more fairly?

- Why must poor pay more?
- High cost, high friction, not seamless, intermittent access.
- Because so many systems emphasize hypertextuality, many important voices are hidden, leading to digital invisibility of prepaid and feature phone app users.
- Can/should we find ways of reflecting mobile participation more fairly?
Thank you!  
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