

Prepaid publics and the mobile internet in South Africa:

Patterns in young people's political discourse



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Prepaid/feature phone Apps



LUV

LV

LVE

LOVIN

LOOOO

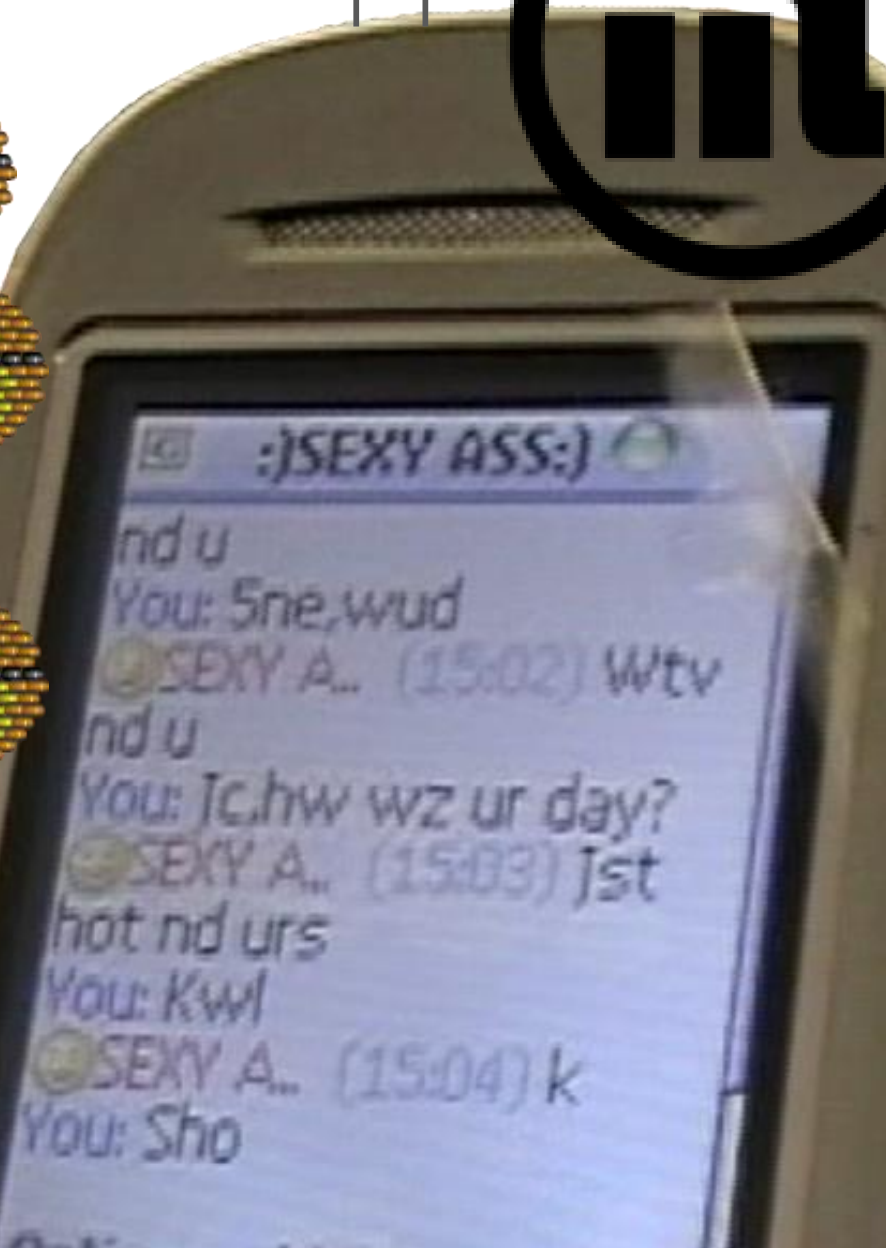
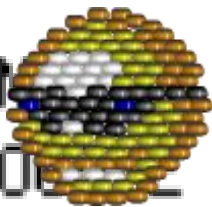
LUURV

LVLY

LOVY

LOVD

LOVN





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!

Call-a-lot R30
• Make calls to the value of R30 • Receive calls for 15 days

How to load this card: Scratch off the covered area to find your secret access number • Press **999** and then the **YES/OK** button • Listen to the voice prompt • Press **2** • Listen again • Punch in your secret access number followed by the **8** button • Listen to make sure that you have loaded the correct access number • End the call **END/END** • You are now ready to make or receive calls.

Access number ►

MTN is not liable for any loss or damage of whatever nature arising from/caused by the loss, theft, unauthorised use or sale and/or manufacture of this card. This card is not transferable once loaded.



Understanding prepaid publics

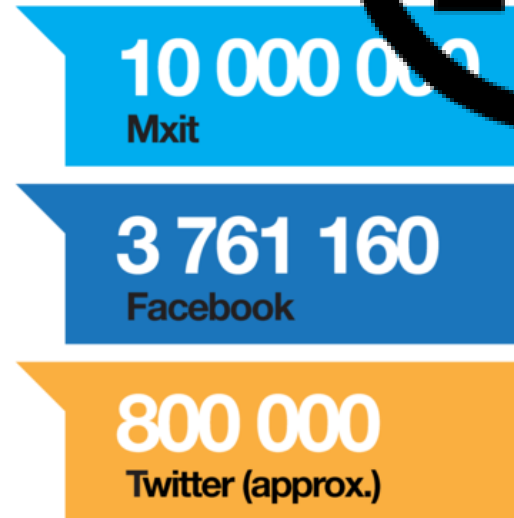
- ▶ Unpacking 'the mobile phone' and activism – role of feature phones & prepaid access.

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



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.

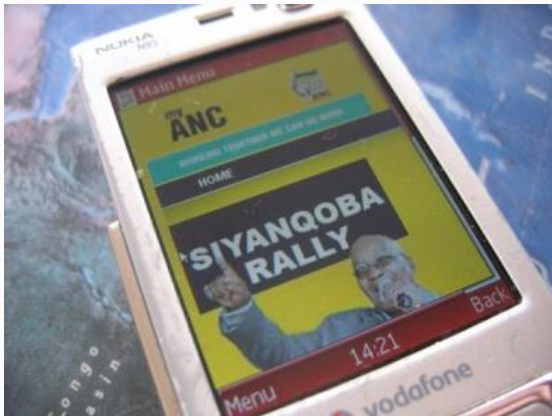
- 'Time bomb', unemployment, failing school system

Youth politics & mobile participation

Unpacking 'the mobile phone' and activism

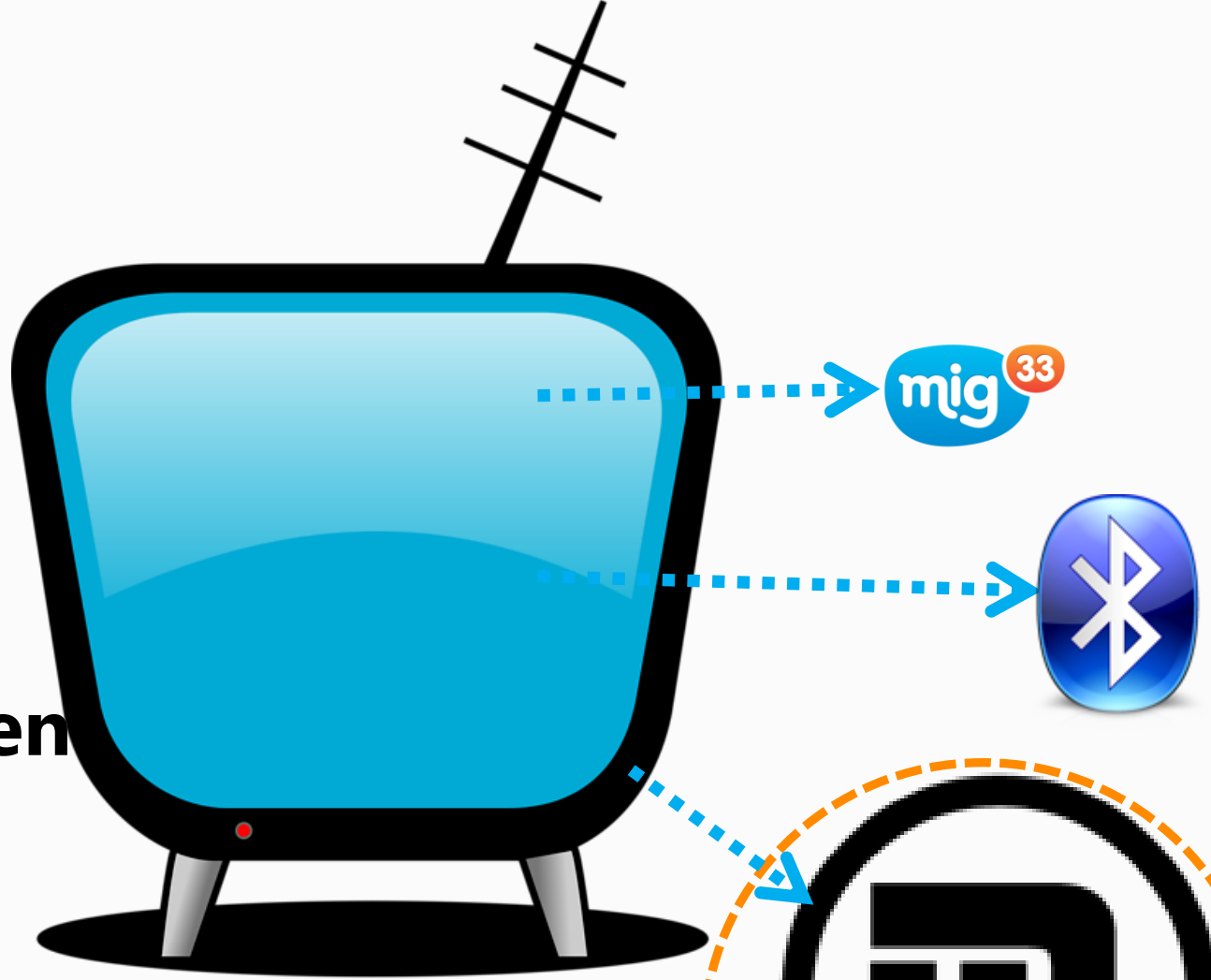
▶ 2007-9 –ANCYL and Julius Malema as king makers for Jacob Zuma, mobile used to mobilise 'footsoldiers'

- 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

hottt_lipz: Cant wait 2 vote 😄 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 pers0nal love

hottt_lipz: No matter hw many c0rrupti0n charges he
myt hav..

ladyfair.aura: Vote anC ANC ANC

gatineau: What hot

angelgreen: Mva Cope 4 Hope A peace loving
.Corruptless New SA 🍷

ANC National 2: keke-fs has left

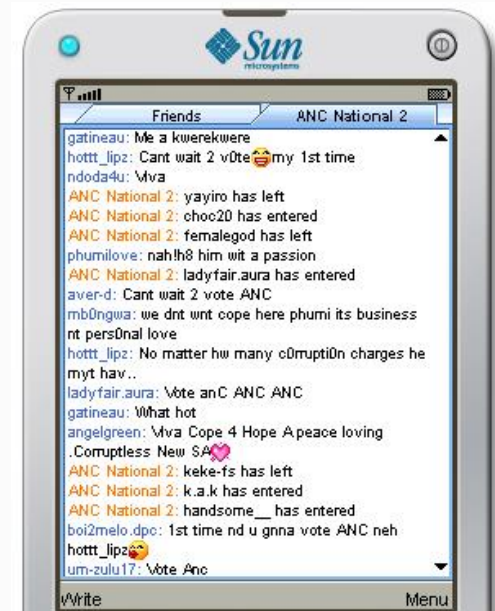
ANC National 2: k.a.k has entered

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



Pixel activism



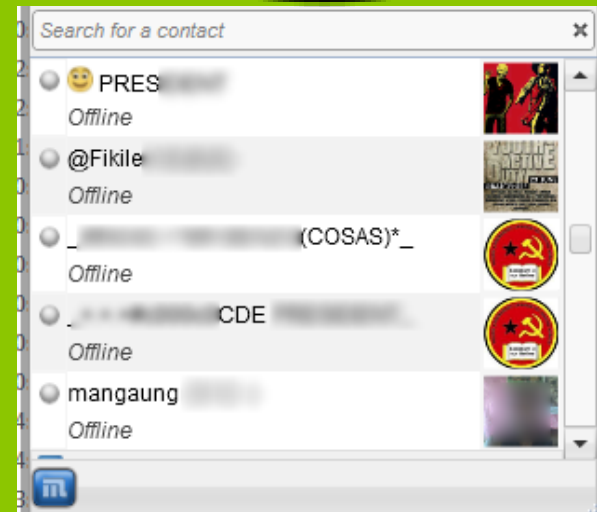
FutureLeader & CdeJimmy (COSAS activists from small town in Limpopo province)

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?

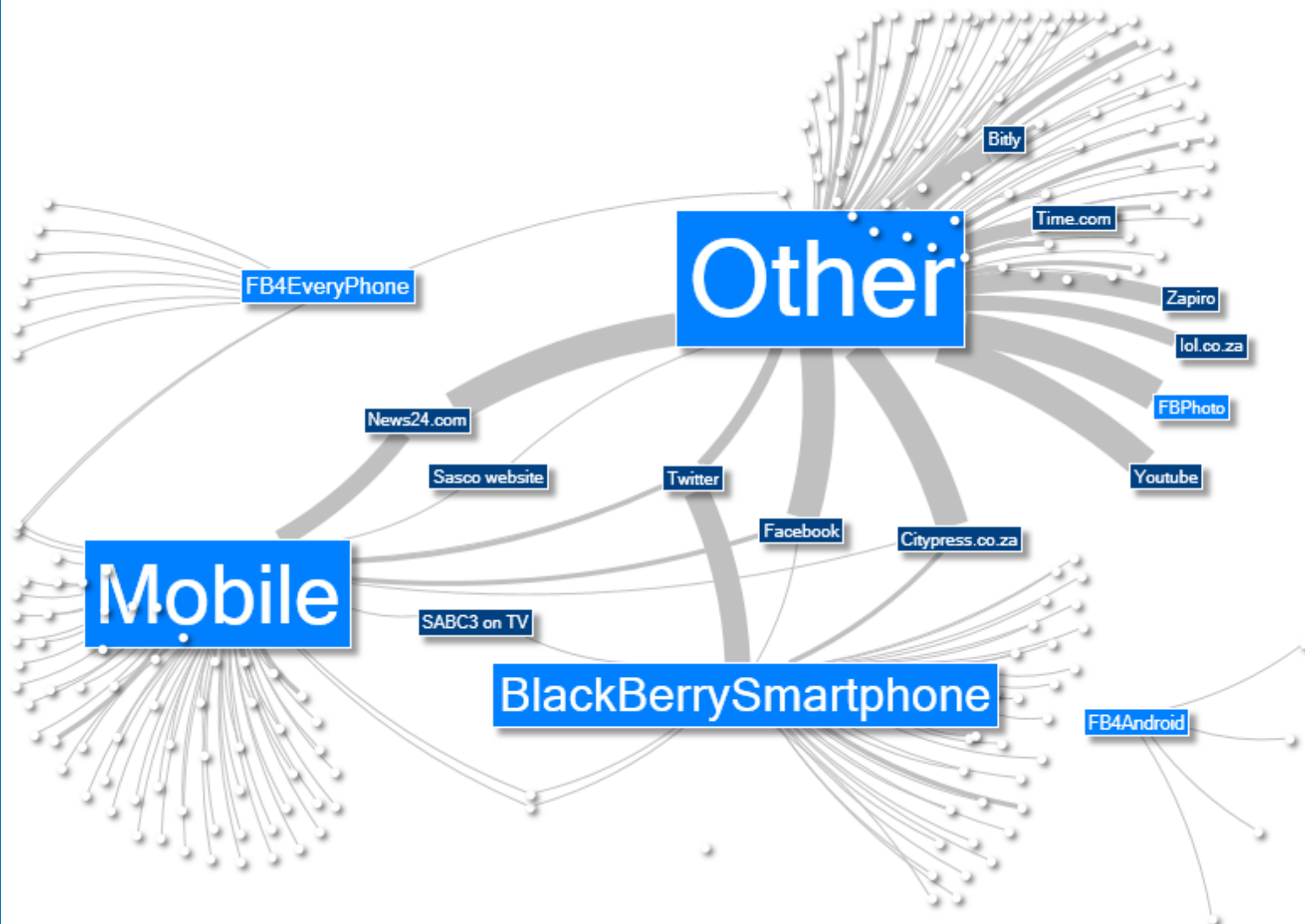
Table 1: Link vs Platform in public Facebook status updates mentioning 'Zuma spear'

		Mobile	Other	Total
	Link	14	195	209
		3.4%	47.6%	51.0%
	No link	133	68	201
		32.4%	16.6%	49.0%
		147	263	410
		35.9%	64.1%	100.0%

410 Facebook status updates (matching "zuma spear" "17-28 May 2012)

Zuma spear – limited mobile linking

Public Facebook updates matching "zumaspear" Media sources and mobile platforms





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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