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Moblogging and Belonging:

New Mobile Phone Practices and Young People's Sense of Social Inclusion

Ingrid Richardson
Murdoch University
School of MCC, Div. of Arts
South Street, Murdoch, WA 6150
I.Richardson@murdoch.edu.au

Amanda Third
Murdoch University
School of MCC, Div. of Arts
South Street, Murdoch, WA 6150
A.Third@murdoch.edu.au

Ian MacColl
University of Queensland
School of ITEE
QUEENSLAND 4072
ianm@itee.uq.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Late teens and young adults are prolific users of interactive and networked mobile media, and already possess a certain level of literacy with the capabilities of newer generation mobile phones. That is, they are well-attuned to the recent shift to user-generated micromedia; indeed, their communicative and media practices are characterized by information connectedness, small-scale digital content creation and peer-to-peer file sharing. This paper describes some of the background research to a research project entitled "Moblogging and Belonging" being undertaken jointly by researchers at Murdoch University and the University of Queensland. This project, funded by a Telstra Community Development Fund grant and scheduled for completion in 2009, aims to build on young people's existing mobile media skills by utilising the video capture and web capabilities of newer generation mobile phones, thus enabling them to creatively author, edit and publish their own 'quality' content around local/community events, stories and issues. In doing so, this project hopes to encourage young people to rethink their media practices as community-oriented rather than merely personal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades many of the distinctions between mass media and communications technologies have converged to become 'network media'. As internet-based services are progressively experienced in terms of everyday media content provision, the spaces of information and communication become genuinely merged. Such a shift means that 'audiences' become 'users'.

Late teens and young adults, often described as the 'millennial generation' [12] are well-attuned to this shift to user-generated micromedia. Indeed, their communicative and media practices are characterized by information connectedness, a focus on immediacy, multitasking, and small-scale digital content creation and sharing. That is, they are prolific users of interactive and networked mobile media, and already possess a certain level of literacy with the capabilities of newer generation mobile phones. Yet in Australia, much of the user-generated content created on mobile phones (photographs, video, ring-tones) derives from

interpersonal communication and individual preferences. That is user-generated content has tended to be produced and circulated in individualizing ways, taking the form, for example, of personalizing one's ring tone or screensaver. In combination with marketing strategies that promote the personalization of mobile phone technologies [15], the individualised uses of mobile phones have led to a common sense understanding of the mobile phone as a tool in the production of individual identity, as opposed to community identity. Further, mobile phone usage continues to be dominated primarily by 'talk' and text messaging. There is little in the way of a *critical* literacy of mobile media functionality, and limited use of the mobile phone as a web-capable device.

This paper outlines an initial investigation into the potential for mobile phone practices to articulate (with) forms of community identity. We begin by discussing the emergent phenomenon of moblogging – a dynamic cross-platform interface that allows one to create text, photographs and video content on one's mobile phone and upload it directly onto a shared website – and its capacity to facilitate forms of communication among young people that support and sustain an enhanced sense community. We then describe a current research project (due for completion in 2009) entitled 'Moblogging and Belonging' and funded by a Telstra Community Development Fund grant. Utilising the video capture and web capabilities of newer generation mobile phones, our project aims to build on these skills by extending young people's mobile media literacy, enabling them to creatively author, edit and publish their own 'quality' content around local/community events, stories and issues. In doing so, this project encourages young people to rethink their media practices as community oriented rather than merely personal. Using a 'deep' ethnographic approach we aim to understand how Australian teenagers currently mix-and-match virtual and face-to-face modes of communication, what 'community' means to young people, and how network media (i.e. interactive and online media) is embedded in their sense of community.

Mobile phones are already thoroughly integral to the social interactions of Australian teenagers. To date, research shows that teenagers use the messaging and talk capabilities of mobile phones in a limited manner (primarily due to cost inhibitors) to maintain peer networks and remain contactable by parents and guardians. In academic literature on digital technologies, there is

growing evidence to suggest that the uptake of mobile phone technology and the emergence of user-generated websites provides opportunities for new kinds of communities to develop that blur the boundaries between 'local' (physical, geographical) and 'online' (virtual, digitally networked) social interaction. Moreover, we suggest that young people may no longer make a clear distinction between face-to-face and mediated/online communication, but flexibly mix and match a number of modes of techno-social interaction (SMS, voice, email, online chat, face-to-face). Since many teenagers are already users of advanced mobile handsets, we aim to explore how moblogging can work to enhance young people's sense of local and virtual community in innovative ways.

2. THE LOCATIVE ASPECTS OF NEW MOBILE PHONE PRACTICES

Mobile phones are key interfaces in the shift from the traditional analogue paradigm of broadcast entertainment to user-driven and 'microcast' media content. One of the most significant manifestations of digital media is the way users have been empowered to 'cast' content that they themselves have created or helped to create. No longer simply devices for communication, mobile phones have become interactive media in themselves. The significance of mobile media as devices for photo and video creation is evident in the burgeoning of mobile photo and film exhibitions (e.g. Cellph Portrait, Mobile Moments, the Mobile Phone Photo Show, Mobifest Mobile Movie Awards). As bandwidth restrictions subside we will potentially experience an influx in media that reflects this interpersonal engagement and interactivity with media; as mobile users we will shift from the position of audience/receiver to participant/creator. In terms of desktop computers we have already witnessed this with the explosive growth of video repositories such as Youtube, personal social networks like MySpace, and massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) like *Everquest* and *Eve Online*, and virtual worlds such as *Second Life*.

Such a shift, as new media theorists have claimed for digital and online interactive media in general, means that 'consumers' become 'users' and creators, a development that has further popularised the term 'user-generated' content. The proliferation of mobile online activities – broadly via mobile phones, laptops, pagers, PDAs, MP3 players and other hand-helds – has also changed the way we think about being 'on' 'at' or 'in' a simulated or computer space, and the way we think about being 'on' or 'off' line [11, p.4]. As Gerard Goggin points out, as 3G and 4G mobiles become part of network media more generally, the most "intensive activity and cultural ferment" around mobile camera and video phone use (especially user-generated content) comes from the direction of the internet 4, p.151]. In this user-driven context, the mobile phone as networked mobile media device – in its own right – is giving rise to both new ways of engaging with media content, and new ways of interacting with actual and virtual interactive environments. Video and image content, for example, can be captured by the mobile's inbuilt digital camera, automatically edited into a personal documentary by onboard editing software, and emailed, blogged, or mms-ed to friends around the world, downloaded onto a computer, or viewed on a

domestic TV set or home theatre system. As Adriana de Souza e Silva argues: "Because many mobile devices are constantly connected to the Internet, as is the case of the i-mode standard in Japan (NTT DoCoMo, 2006) users do not perceive physical and digital spaces as separate entities and do not have the feeling of 'entering' the Internet, or being immersed in digital spaces, as was generally the case when one needed to sit down in front of a computer screen and dial a connection" [2, p.263]. Being online and networked thus becomes another function of the mobile phone, but it is importantly a *different* experience of the internet and online connectivity: the supposedly dematerialising effects of cyberspace and telepresent interaction become enfolded inside present contexts and physical engagement with the everyday lifeworld.

Moreover, as the mobile device 'makes room' for media, it is not the case that media content creation is superseding communication functionality, but rather that there is a complex merger of mobile-enabled media and communication practices. Such hybrid practices are evidenced by the use of one's personal mobile phone as a camera and documentary photo archive, the phenomena of 'moblogging' or 'lifeblogging' (updating photo and text blogs or multimedia diaries via mobile phone – the latter term marketed by Nokia as part of their mobile service), SMS/MMS-ing as a means of posting to public forums and urban screens, and the practice of video phoning (itself an often discomfiting hybrid of video conferencing and mobile voice telephony) as a way to 'show and tell' one's immediate surrounds.

One of the significant effects of the shift to *locative* media contexts – i.e. mobile, globally positioned communication combined with online connectivity and user-generated micromedia – involves the change in our perception that virtual online interaction (often referred to as cyberspace) and the physical space of our local and material environment are distinct experiential domains. For example, posting text and images via the web to a public screen in a social space such as a bar or café, or onto even larger urban screens,¹ effectively cuts across virtual and actual spheres of communication and information. The mobile phone graffiti board 'Wiffiti' (a contraction of the words wireless and graffiti), have been placed in a number of cafés and bars in several U.S. cities, allowing anybody to post text messages in realtime to the large screen. As long as they have the right number, posters do not have to be present in the social space <http://www.wiffiti.com/>. The messages are updated sometimes as frequently as by-the-minute, and can be viewed both in the café or bar and on the Wiffiti website as slowly shifting sedimentary layers of text 'reminiscent of a tag cloud' [5]. The purpose of Wiffiti, according to its creators, is to "empower public expression..., fostering an open and strong sense of citizenship and community" (<http://www.wiffiti.com/>). Although it is possible to post messages remotely and grab screen shots from the website, the important feature of Wiffiti is that it is both located (on-the-street) and dynamically 'in-the-moment', focusing not on the

¹ Struppek describes *The People's Portraits* by Zhang Ga which enabled people to send their photos around the world to a network of city screens such as the one in Times Square, New York [17, p.178].

multi-player community (as with location-based games), but on the more immediate and co-located community engaging in face-to-face socialising while simultaneously 'sharing' the normally quite exclusive privacy of SMS communication. The cross-platform nature of the Wiffiti phenomenon – the website also links to a lively blog called "txt out loud"² – effectively coalesces the urban, computer and mobile screens, suggesting that we need to consider the *hybridised* and *networked* disposition of contemporary mediated forms.

This collapse of virtual and actual domains along with the increasing hybridity of media forms together defines the oxymoronic term 'glocal', and also occurs with such practices as moblogging, where one's immediate and embodied context/environment becomes embedded in the communicative act of uploading mobile images and video onto a shared web interface. At a recent conference on Urban Screens, Maria Stukoff stated that next generation mobile phone users are primed to engage 'with cinema on-the-go, mini galleries and cultural information via their hand-held devices' [16]. Indeed, as she suggests, mobile devices that can deliver broadcast, 'small' and online media should themselves be considered 'viable' urban screens and vital nodes in the network that delivers content to these media interfaces.

3. MEDIATED COMMUNITIES

Historically, we have customarily experienced telephone technologies as highly personal or interpersonal interfaces, yet as mobile handsets become web-enabled, with video capture and editing capabilities, we need to reconsider how our sense of community and neighbourhood is realised through media forms. As Hjorth suggests, 'whilst the mobile phone globally may be seen as an example of growing "networked individualism" and a symbol of late capitalism, it is also very much inflected by the local and... informed by sociality' [8, p.236]. In academic literature on digital technologies (in particular, see the Pew Internet Reports at <http://www.pewinternet.org/>) there is growing evidence to suggest that the uptake of mobile phone technology and the emergence of user-generated websites provides opportunities for new kinds of communities to develop that transcend the boundaries between 'local' (physical, geographical) and 'online' (virtual, digitally networked) social interaction. Through internet facilities, for example, people can now participate collaboratively in 'glocal' communities of interest – bringing together both a 'close' sense of place (where one lives) and a 'broad' online sensibility.

User-generated content and micromedia mean we need to think differently about how media are embedded in our experiences and perceptions of 'community'. In the first instance, the shift to user-generated content entails a parallel shift in the structural hierarchies of knowledge production that have traditionally underpinned and shaped communities.

Historically, the notion of community has embedded individuals in time and space through a collective process of imagined belonging. In this respect, as Fernback notes, 'the term "community" encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions' [3, p.39]. Importantly, since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, individuals' sense of community has gradually become increasingly embroiled in the processes of mediation. In his landmark text, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson tracked the emergence of the newspaper and its imbrication with the rise of the 'imagined community' of the modern nation [1]. He argued that the newspaper gave both material and symbolic credence to the embryonic idea of the nation by both summoning a geographically defined audience and providing that audience with the scripts necessary to inspire the collective imagining of national belonging. As Anderson made clear in his linkage of the rise of the nation with the daily newspaper and the emergence of new reading publics as products of the development of production capitalism, communities are neither organic nor technologically determined. Rather, they serve the prevailing social, cultural, economic and political interests underpinning dominant social formations. Further, what Anderson perceived so astutely was that the formation of communities is based not only on physical location but also on the sharing of particular kinds of stories – on the circulation of communal *narratives* – and highlighted the role of the media in the production of community. In effect, he recognised that the media are narrative spaces. They are not only implicated in the spatial and temporal definition and organization of communities but, also, constitute an important vehicle for the circulation of the narrative scripts of 'community' and 'belonging'. The media, that is, operate as spaces of 'solidarity and social interaction' that facilitate the exchange of 'the shared experiences and symbolic constructions that bind us culturally' [3, p.40]. They provide a mode for narrativising our sense of belonging – for sharing knowledge of local events and happenings with others. In this respect, they actively operate to call communities into being.

In the era of mass communication, the formal and informal regulation of the narratives that circulated through the media served to construct particular kinds of socially sanctioned community, perhaps most notably that of national community. However, in the era of new media communication – characterised by globally integrated systems of instantaneous and multidirectional communication – our understandings of community have undergone a significant transformation. Community has, to a certain extent, been disembedded from its traditional groundings in time and space and liberated from the mechanisms of regulation that proscribed traditional forms of community. In contrast to traditional forms of national community, virtual communities coalesce around *common interests*. As Fernback notes, 'community within cyberspace emphasises a community of interests that may lead to a communal spirit and apparent social bonding' [3, p.41]. An individual's participation in a virtual community is thus based on personal choice and preference rather than predetermined by social institutions. Further, 'community' is now configured primarily as a by-product of *communication* – it is first and foremost understood as a communicative act. This is evidenced by the fact that community problems are constructed as the effect of

² See <http://www.wiffiti.com/txtoutloud/>

inadequate communication: 'We have developed the belief that political, moral, and social problems are the result of a lack of communication' [10: pp.9-10].

In recent years, social scientists, analysts and commentators have proposed that connectedness between people – the very stuff of 'community' – has diminished [14; 7]. That is, it is suggested that both the range and number of discernable groupings that can be described by way of community has lessened, as well as the strength of the ties that bind these communities. Concerns about the demise of the community are particularly audible in relation to the emergence of online communities. Claims that virtual communities are insular in nature and that they foster shallow ties have proliferated and fuelled a general concern about the potential predominance of online communities over traditional forms of community. Despite increased connection between individuals, then, online communities are seen as a symptom of impoverished social cohesion. As Willson suggests, because contemporary communities are generally perceived as communities of *choice*, community 'belonging' is more ambiguous and multiple: 'boundaries are represented as more porous, enabling a freer, less ritualized movement among these communities and a more flexible membership' [19, p.37]. The other side of this flexibility and ambiguity, the argument goes, is that communities and the people that comprise them have become less connected and cohesive. Yet it is clear that community organisations adopt, absorb and/or are challenged by opportunities or barriers to connect, as they make decisions and act through the Internet, e-mail, mobile phone and other new forms of media. Exactly what values are expressed or reflected in the development and integration of such technologies becomes part of our culture and identity, an aspect of our community 'being'. Fears about the negative impact of text based virtual communities are without doubt, exaggerated or misrepresented. However, what they highlight is a cultural anxiety around the lack of a 'real world' referent for online communities and a pervasive suspicion of the potential for online communities to articulate with local, spatially embedded community practices in productive ways.

Debate has also flared over the effects of young people's use of ICTs and digital media (*Time Magazine*, April 10, 2006; *ABC Radio Morning Shows*, October 20, 2006 & April 3, 2007). In particular, it is feared that the recent and rapid proliferation of mediated communication impacts negatively on young people's opportunities for face-to-face communication, shifting the locus of individual and community socialisation away from traditional social institutions. This is said to leave young people without an appropriate sense of embeddedness in their community. These kinds of claims have been fuelled by the perceived role of mobile phone technologies in inciting the 'anti-social' behaviour associated with, for example, the Cronulla riots in Sydney and gang-related violence in Perth and Melbourne. Our "Moblogging and Belonging" project seeks to critique both the negative interpretation of the effects of mobile phones and the internet, and explores in 'local' contexts one mode of cross-platform digital content creation, 'moblogging'. Given the penetration of mobile phone technologies into the youth market and young people's increasing integration of mobile communication devices into their everyday lives, we believe it is urgent that research be undertaken

to assess the impact of the mobile phone and its role in promoting social inclusion and the creative potential of young people.

4. MOBLOGGING AND BELONGING

Whilst moblogging is a new form of mediated communication whose potential for fostering social awareness and community building remains as yet unexplored, it is our contention that moblogging can potentially operate as an antidote to contemporary fears about the decline of community as it bridges the perceived chasm between the virtual and the local.

Until very recently, virtual communities, whilst configured as communicative entities, have entailed a very limited range of communication practices. Because of the limitations of new media technologies, they have tended to operate as primarily text-based communities – communities that function through the exchange of the written word. As Ruschkoff has noted, cyberspace has traditionally been a 'silent world, [where] all conversation is typed. To enter it, one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone' [as cited in 10, p.15]. Moblogging is distinguished from other forms of text based virtual community in its active incorporation of the image. It seemingly transports physical places into the virtual realm whilst simultaneously integrating virtual media capabilities into individuals' negotiations of material space. As such, it signifies in the popular imagination as a practice that connects local and virtual worlds and thus is a practice that carves out a symbolic terrain for dialogue between these worlds. Moblogging revitalises the possibility of rendering community in terms that reconstitute the importance of place – of physical locatedness. It provides a space for the sharing of both local and virtual narratives. However, this is not to suggest that moblogging calls into being a community that is somehow more 'real' than those that form in relation to text-based virtual communication. Moblogging communities emerge in the interaction between two forms of symbolic community production – one based in the real world, and one based in the virtual world. As such, it neither substitutes, nor necessarily augments, existing forms of community. Rather moblogging constitutes an ulterior space – a 'third space' – for the imagining of community with potential to overcome the 'social isolation' of both local and virtual worlds. In this way, camera phones and image archival practices 'are extending personal imaging practices and allowing for the evolution of new kinds of imaging practices... [that can] have important repercussions for how we understand who we are' [6, p.279].

Mark Warschauer has argued that promoting social inclusion depends upon finding ways of bridging 'online communication and other means of social networking... Approaches to promoting social inclusion that rely solely on virtual communities are ill-advised... Successful approaches usually combine online and face-to-face networking' [18, p.162]. Warschauer is a proponent of 'community informatics'. In contrast to the 'virtual worlds' approach which emphasises the building of social interactions via virtual communities, the community informatics approach emphasises the fact that whilst 'technologies may create new possibilities... they do not in themselves represent separate

worlds' [18, p.161]. Community informatics thus insists upon the integration of local and online contexts. We argue that moblogging practices provide a way of bringing together the local and the virtual in a manner that could have very positive repercussions for young people's sense of social inclusion. As a locative media practice that facilitates the merging of local and virtual worlds in unprecedented ways, moblogging constitutes an ideal vehicle for realising the goals of community and capacity building in a way that is consistent with the community informatics approach of integrating new media technologies, practices and communities with material world initiatives. With this in mind, our 'Moblogging and Belonging' project focuses on communities that are *location-based* yet facilitated, transformed and *networked* by new technologies of media and communication.

It is clear that mobile phones are already thoroughly integral to the social interactions of teenagers; moreover, young people may no longer make a clear distinction between face-to-face and mediated/online communication, but flexibly combine a number of modes of techno-social interaction. That is, young people appear to negotiate the different communicative demands of multiple platforms with relative ease. Since many teenagers are already users of advanced mobile handsets, we aim to explore how moblogging can work to enhance young people's sense of local and virtual community in innovative ways. As cross-platform mobile/web interfaces that enable the sharing of digital content created on the mobile phone, moblogs empower users to both generate their own media (text, images, video, audio) and share their creativity and personal narratives. Mobile literacy and design workshops will be run for young people participating in the project. Then, participants will be invited to actively engage in the design and implementation of a mobile log interface. It is hoped that the involvement of participants in the moblog design process, coupled with the capacity of mobile content to be captured on-the-street and on-the-move, will mean that the moblog interface is sensitive to both context and user-experience. By extension, this project aims to provide a mechanism for young people's community engagement, a public forum for the expression of young people's views, and the incorporation of young people's views and practices into the development of their communities.

Focusing on three target groups of 20 participants (two groups of upper high-school students in WA and Queensland, and one group of school leavers in the Peel region), this project:

(i) conducts an ethnographic study into young people's current use and experience of local and online communities. Ethnography involves the study of small groups of people in their own environment. That is, rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects ('the big picture'), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed and 'deep' understanding of the circumstances and everyday practices of the group being studied. Ethnography is based on qualitative methods (e.g. detailed observations, fieldwork, structured and unstructured interviews, analysis of transcripts, participant observation). Visual Ethnography explores the use and potential of photography, video and hypermedia in ethnographic and social research. In particular we will use the technique of photo and video 'elicitation', a methodological tool using photographs or video - in this case

taken by the participants - to elicit ethnographic information about the issues being investigated. Deploying ethnographic approaches will enable us to qualitatively track young people's responses to moblogging, to delineate the ways they narrate their (sense of) community that emerges from these interactions, and to assess its impact on young people's sense of social inclusion;

(ii) explores ways that young people currently use both their mobile phones and the internet as 'community' devices, and how current obstacles (economic, media literacy, accessibility) might be overcome via the creation of an innovative, interactive, cross-platform, user-led and user-generated moblog interface;

(iii) holds mobile literacy and design workshops on how to create effective mobile phone photo and video content. In providing a how-to manual for this process, our project will enable collaborative groups of young people to develop and sustain their own platform for creative mobile content that is 'authentic' to their everyday communication and media use;

(iv) creates a mobile log interface using a participatory design (PD) approach. Participatory Design engages and collaborates with the intended users in the early stages of developing an interface, to ensure that the design prioritises the agency and experience of the user. Participatory Design is motivated by a commitment to both the usability and usefulness of technology, on the one hand, and to active user-participation in technology design, on the other hand. It involves users in the design process as co-designers by empowering them to propose and generate design alternatives. The essence of the participatory design approach is to develop mutual trust and respect and effective communication and collaboration between all parties involved in or affected by the design. Participatory Design thus engages with users in their own context and develops early prototypes that users can evaluate, understand, appropriate and interrogate from within their own contexts and practices. In this project the PD approach, over several iterations, will allow the participants to actively contribute to the creation of the moblog. This will potentially increase their sense of 'ownership' and ideally in the longer term (i.e. post-project) will increase the likelihood that participants will continue to maintain the moblog as one aspect of their community interactions.

The development of a user-led and local community owned moblog will enable young people to create and publish their own 'authentic' digital content while using their mobile phones (while they are on-the-move and on-the-street). In this way, young people may potentially find ways to enhance their sense of belonging and creativity through the sharing of their everyday life stories on the web. Participants will also develop skills in creating, editing and publishing their own digital content using a device - the mobile phone - that is already familiar and organic to their everyday ICT and media use.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the emerging mobile communication phenomenon of moblogging as a tool for social inclusion, and presented a hypothesis about its potential impacts on young people's sense of community. We have suggested that

moblogging, as a media practice entailing the visual and aural diarising of individuals' local everyday experience, has the capacity to bridge the gap between local and virtual communities by bringing the local to life in the virtual realm whilst simultaneously embedding the virtual in material but mobile contexts. As such, we have argued that moblogging, perhaps more so than other existing forms of mediated communication, may provide an ideal mode through which to pursue the goal of social inclusion in a manner that honours the principles of community informatics – namely to foster forms of virtual communication that feed into 'real' world community and capacity building in productive ways.

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