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Available online: 01 Mar 2012

To cite this article: Sarah Chiumbu (2012): Exploring mobile phone practices in social movements in South Africa - the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, African Identities, 10:2, 193-206

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2012.657863

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring mobile phone practices in social movements in South Africa – the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign

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(Received 22 August 2011; final version received 22 February 2012)

Mobile phones have developed explosively in Africa, with South Africa having one of the highest mobile phone penetrations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mobile phones have introduced a set of new communicative and cultural practices. Innovative pricing models in Africa, such as ‘pay-as-you go’ and ‘please call me’ have helped to make mobile phones a part of the lives of many who are otherwise disconnected. Social justice movements in South Africa, often marginalized by mainstream communication systems, are increasingly using mobile phones to coordinate actions, mobilize and create networks despite the fact that most of these movements have their origins among deprived communities. This article analyses how the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign appropriates mobile phones and the impact of this appropriation on its roles and collective identities. In addition, the article examines how the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign has (re)appropriated and re-shaped the mobile phone to amplify traditional methods of mobilization; leading to the creation of what Henry Jenkins (2006) has called ‘convergence culture’. Drawing on social construction of technology and domestication theories, the article argues that mobile phones have not replaced traditional ways of mobilization, but have amplified them. In this regard, the use of both traditional mobilization tools and mobile phones strengthen mobilization activities and give new meaning to the mobile phone.

Keywords: social movements; mobile phones; collective identity; Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign

Introduction

Mobile phones have revolutionized Africa during the past two decades. Several studies show that Africa is the first continent to have more mobile phone users than fixed-line subscribers (Goldstuck 2010). For instance, less than 3% of the population had access to a telephone in 2001, but by 2010 the number of mobile subscribers had grown to approximately 500 million (Rao 2011). There is no doubt that the mobile phone has begun to occupy an important place in the social, political and economic reconfiguration of Africa.

This tremendous growth has spawned growing literature on the significance of mobile telephony in Africa. However, most of this literature is embedded within the modernization and ‘leapfrogging’ paradigm that equates use of technology with economic growth and development (e.g. Heeks and Jagun 2007, Waverman et al. 2005, Williams 2005). This is in contrast to research conducted in other parts of the world that focuses on mobile phones

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and how they are affecting and reshaping cultural and social practices (e.g. Lonkila and Gladarev 2008, Castells et al., 2007, Ito et al., 2005, Ling and Pedersen 2005, Ling 2004, Katz 2003, Katz and Arkus 2002).

However, literature that engages with agency and how Africans are using the mobile phone to negotiate their multiple identities is slowly emerging. The main argument running through this literature is that not only are mobile phones shaping social realities in African societies, but in turn Africans and their societies are (re)shaping the mobile phone technologies in different ways (e.g. De Bruijn et al. 2009, Kriem 2009, Hahn and Kibora 2008). Other emerging studies on this subject engage with how Africans are using the mobile phone for democratic activism (Obadare 2006, Mudhai 2006, 2004), for rural livelihood strategies (e.g. Burrell 2008) and building and maintaining social networks (Skuse and Cousins 2008). De Bruijn et al. (2009) argue that there is now an emergence of an African ‘mobile phone culture’ centred on a multiplicity of activities involving the mobile phone.

This article contributes to this growing literature by looking at how the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, a social justice social movement in Cape Town, South Africa, appropriates mobile phones for mobilization and networking. The article draws upon qualitative interviews and focus group discussions conducted in Delft Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area (TRA),1 Newfields Village in Hanover Park, Silver Town2 and the Gugulethu in April and October 2010. Interviews and focus group discussions were supplemented by document analysis, analysis of the movements’ websites and literature review.

Social movements, new media and mobilization

In the early 1990s, the Zapatista of Chiapas movement in Mexico first made use of the Internet to protest against the North American Free Trade Agreement (Castells 1997). Inspired by the success of this form of mobilization, global social movements that emerged in the 1990s to protest corporate neo-liberalism have employed the Internet and lately mobile phones to share information, organize direct action and coordinate activities that confront economic and social injustices spawned by global capitalism (see for example Ayers 2003, Meikle 2002, Bennet 2003, Kahn and Kellner 2004, Juris 2005, Wall 2007). Indeed, ICTs are seen as alternative public spheres with the ability not only to bypass restrictive state and corporate mainstream media, but also their capacity to overcome limits of time and space (McCaughey and Ayers 2003, Kahn and Kellner 2004). In the last five or so years, there has been a broad adoption of mobile phones by social movements in Africa. While many of these groups have found obstacles in using fixed telephony due to unavailability, they have quickly grasped the potential of the mobile phone and are using it for various mobilization purposes. Whereas this uptake has been documented in ‘grey’ literature, there is very little academic research that critically addresses these uses. In South Africa, social justice movements are increasingly using the Internet and mobile phones to mobilize, create networks and lobby for social justice, despite the fact that most of these movements have their origins among poor communities.

Most mobile phone practices by social movements have been coordinated by institutional and donor organizations through various technical assistance mechanisms. The Anti-Eviction Campaign presents an interesting and unique example in that it has utilized mobile phones in an organic and bottom-up manner. How does a social movement, rooted in poor and marginalized communities, appropriate the mobile phone? While existing research on social movements use of new media technologies in South Africa focuses on administrative uses of the Internet (e.g. Wasserman 2007, Loudon 2010), this present study brings a different aspect, foregrounding the active appropriation of mobile
phones that suit the daily realities of the Anti-Eviction Campaign members. Again this study moves away from the often celebratory and deterministic studies of social movements and ICTs that mainly focus on the emancipatory roles and revolutionary potentials of new media technologies (see Van de Donk et al. 2004, McCaughey and Ayers 2003). This article argues instead that new media technologies do not mean that movement leaders abandon other, more traditional, communication tools. On the contrary, the use of both traditional communication tools and mobile phones strengthen mobilization activities and give new meaning to the appropriation of the mobile phone. In other words, mobile phones amplify existing communication methods rather than attenuating them.

**Theoretical framework: domestication and social construction of technology**

The adoption and uses of new media technologies have been researched mainly from three reductionist perspectives. First, the adoption of technologies is viewed to be rational, linear and mono causal, where the instrumental use of the technology is foregrounded; second other approaches focus on the form of technology, thus the technology itself becomes important. Third, attempting to move away from these instrumentalist and technological deterministic methods, other perspectives have been developed that focus on social actors and their shaping of technology. However, these three approaches – instrumentalist, technological determinist, and social determinist – still remain overly reductionist (Dahlberg 2004). In attempting to depart from these approaches, various constructivist perspectives have been developed that highlight agency and interaction in appropriating technology. These approaches recognize that a balance must be maintained between technology’s transformative capacities on the one hand and social agent’s capacity to utilize technology and shape them in their use, on the other hand (Salter 2003, p. 121). This balance can also be explained by Anthony Giddens’s structuration theory which posits that structure and agency are mutually dependent and internally related. His theory offers ‘an account of human agency which recognizes that human beings are purposive actors, who virtually all the time know what they are doing ... and why ...’ (Giddens 1984, p. 258). Giddens refers to the balancing of agency (action) and structure as the duality of structure: social structures make social action possible, and at the same time social action creates those very structures. In terms of technology, this duality of structure has been explained by Orlikowski (1992) to denote technology’s duality and flexibility – *duality* in terms of technology being ‘constructed by actors working in a given social context’, and the same technology being ‘socially constructed by actors through the different means they attach to it’ – and *flexibility* with regards to the capacity of users to interpret, appropriate and manipulate technology in various ways (Orlikowski 1992, cited in Silverstone and Haddon 1996, p. 58).

A variation of the structuration framework is the domestication framework which focuses on the subjective appropriation of technology and views subjects’ use of technologies as active, creative and expressive (Mackay and Gillespie 1992). Theories of domestication have been used to explain how people appropriate technology according to their lived realities (Haddon 2006, Ling and Pedersen 2003). The concept of domestication which emerged in the 1980s considers ‘the complexity of everyday life and technology’s place within its dynamic rituals, rules and patterns’ (Berker et al. 2006, p. 1). Domestication provides ways to refute technological determinism and rationalistic biases. As Gay et al. argue,

the advantage of the domestication concept is explicit attention it brings to the symbolic meanings of technology. By domesticating the technology, users may ascribe new and changed meaning to the artefacts. (Gay et al., cited in Hynes and Rommes 2006, p. 126)
Although the terms ‘domestic’ implies a household setting, the concept is also applicable to other areas of everyday life. Increasingly, the concept is used to explore ‘how mobile phones are ‘tamed’, ‘appropriated’ and made normal, comfortable, useful and part of everyday life settings’ (Haddon 2006, Hahn and Kibora 2008). For instance, in the African context, people have found creative ways of using the mobile phone. Innovative strategies in Africa, such as ‘flashing’ and ‘please call me’ have helped to make mobile phones a part of lives of many people who are otherwise disconnected. Flashing is a practice whereby someone dials a number, lets it ring once or twice and hangs up. It is expected that the other person will call back. ‘Flashing’ or ‘beeping’ has become common in many African countries and is one example of re-interpretation and appropriation of the mobile’s functionality (see Donner 2007, Hahn and Kibora 2008, Kriem 2009). Another feature used is the ‘please call me’ which allows a user to send a free SMS to another (presumably with airtime) phone user asking the latter to call. The recipient simply clicks on the ‘please call me’ message to call back the sender. The ‘please call me’ technology evolved from the practice of ‘beeping’. While the mobile phone carriers claim that they introduced this service in reaction to millions of ‘beepings’ sent a day which were congesting the networks, it is also possible that industry players saw a marketing opportunity in what was invented by ordinary people. The ‘please call me’ has been turned into a marketing and advertising medium. Each message has an advertising space of about 115 characters. The ‘beeping’ practice was thus re-appropriated by mobile phone companies to suit their economic interests. The same development happened in Kenya where the giant mobile phone company Safaricom introduced the now widely used M-Pesa after realizing that people were relying on informal channels using the mobile phone to send and receive money. These two examples also illustrate the dialectic relationship between structure and agency and indicate that ‘micro’ social practices and ‘macro’ economic practices can sometime be interactive and iterative. Thus, the agency found in the use of ‘please call me’ is mediated by mobile phone companies through their software technologies. A particularly instructive illustration of the above practice can be found in Giddens’s structuration theory discussed above. These examples show how agency and social structure each act as an enabling condition of the other. Consequently, we see that social subjects and social systems are continually reproducing and reforming each other. The design/appropriation interface proposed by Silverstone and Haddon (1996) also provides a framework for considering the manner in which the ordinary user can play an innovative role with regard to the shaping of a technology. The design phase consists of three processes – the creation of a technology, the construction of the user and lastly the ‘catching’ of the consumer (Silverston and Haddon 1996, pp. 47–52). On the other side of the equation, consumption of technologies consists of three dimensions: commodification in which certain claims about the technology are made by designers and market players, appropriation in which users bring the technology into their personal space and lastly conversion, referring to the process where those involved in the production and commodification of the technology learn about consumption patterns and use and redesign the technology according to user patterns (Silverston and Haddon 1996, pp. 62–65).

Studies on mobile telephony in Africa have been dominated by technological deterministic approaches, which either foreground the structural limitations of mobile phones or celebrate their role in economic development (e.g. see Heeks and Jagun 2007, Waverman et al. 2005, Williams 2005). The constructionist theories of technology are important to analyse the complex ways in which mobile phones interplay with the lived dynamics and economic realities of social movements in South Africa, whose members often face challenges of access to new media technologies. As Wasserman (2011, p. 156)
also states, the domestication model ‘refuse to afford either technology or society a deterministic role, but view technology and society in interaction’.

**Contextualizing the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign**

South Africa has had social movements groups across the duration of its long struggle history. In the 1970s and 1980s in particular, South Africa witnessed militant and powerful community based movements, which used a wide range of tactics to deligitimize the local government (Sinwell 2011). However, the 1990s saw the rise of what are seen as ‘new’ social movements which are mainly concerned with social and economic justice issues due to dissatisfaction with state and corporate power. It has been argued that these ‘new’ social movements should be seen as a continuation of the social forces that fought against socio-political and economic injustices during the apartheid era (Buhlungu 2006). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a range of social movements such as the Landless People’s Movement, Treatment Action Campaign, the Anti-Privatisation Forum, Concerned Citizens Forum, and Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign emerged in South Africa (Ballard *et al.* 2006) in response to the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies in the mid-1990s by the post-apartheid government and the impetus emerging from the mushrooming of global social movements alluded to earlier.

The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign emerged in 2001 out of critical concern for lack of service delivery, especially pertaining to housing in urban Western Cape. Housing crisis in Cape Town stem from the state adoption of market principles in the provision of housing and public services. The state acts as ‘service ensurer’ rather than a ‘service provider’, meaning that it has adopted a public–private partnership model of delivery (Oldfield and Stokke 2006). Financial cost recovery becomes an important element. Poor households that cannot afford to pay for housing due to high unemployment levels have faced evictions, disconnections of water and electricity. The global financial crisis starting roughly in 2008 has seen an increase in payment arrears and hence evictions. The Campaign is community-driven and its activist strategies centre on ‘informal’ reconnections of services, enforced repossession of evicted houses, mass demonstrations and legal battles. The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign has created spaces of resistance for the average citizen to protect their livelihoods and demonstrates a form of bottom-up active citizenship. Most of its members are victims of evictions or service cuts and were involved in township struggles against apartheid and their involvement in the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign is seen as a natural continuation of their community development activism (Miraftab and Wills 2005, p. 205).

At the writing of this article, the Anti-Eviction Campaign and other social movements in South Africa continue to protest over lack of basis services, joined by other informal township protests. In the face of the global financial crisis that hit the world in 2008 there has been an increase in these protests. However, social movements in South Africa are weakened by their lack of cohesion and unity of purpose. Sinwell (2010) argues that social movement struggles are localized, fragmented and often divided. For instance, service delivery protests that have taken place over the past five years in several townships across South Africa are geographically contained and not coalesced into a national movement. The fragmented nature of social movements in South Africa limits the capacity of these movements creating coherent strategies.

**South Africa’s townships communicative ecology**

To fully understand mobile phone appropriation by deprived communities, such as those that belong to the Anti-Eviction Campaign movement, requires an appreciation of the
communicative ecology of South Africa’s townships. The concept of communicative ecology defines a number of mediated and unmediated forms of communication existing in a community (Tacchi et al. 2003). Foth and Hearn (2007) conceive communicative ecology as having three layers – a technological layer which consists of technologies and connecting media that enable communication and interaction, a discursive layer which is the content of communication available in the community, and finally a social layer which consists of people and social modes of organizing those people. These three layers converge in distinct and localized ‘communicative ecologies’ (Foth and Hearn 2007).

Using the three-tier typology outlined above, the technological layer of communication in South Africa’s townships denotes the mass media and new media technologies, such as the Internet and mobile phones. Most South African townships are deprived as a result of the apartheid legacy. Patterns of media access and usage thus reflect the country’s history of oppression, exclusion and poverty. The mass media in South Africa are generally highly corporate and commercialized, although community radio in some cases provides alternative sources of information. In terms of new media technologies, access to computers and Internet remains limited in most townships, despite many initiatives by the government and private sector to create more equitable access. Insecure housing tenure and lack of a postal address in many townships means that many people cannot apply for fixed landline from the two fixed line providers – Telkom and Neotel (Skuse and Cousins 2005, 2008). In most areas, public phones have been vandalized. Mobile phones have thus provided a relatively affordable two-way voice communication. Mobile phone uptake has been quite high with almost every household owning a mobile handset. In addition, mobile phone containers operated in spaza shops4 or individual homes are widespread across many townships (see Skuse and Cousins 2005, 2008). However, issues of costs and lack of network coverage in some areas act as impediments to mobile phone adoption.

The discursive layer, referring to communication content available to the community is linked to media outlets available. The mainstream media in South Africa, dominated by four print media oligopolies, one dominant public broadcaster, one commercial free-to-air television and two satellite television firms, provide very little space for poor and marginalized people. The content of the media is often supportive of elite and dominant views.

The social layer consisting of community organizations, rallies, community meetings and social clubs provide useful and alternative communicative spaces where social networks are forged and strengthened. These forms of unmediated communication play important roles in broader community struggles for social justice and development. Community activism is critical to securing rights to key services such as water, sanitation and housing and is conducted through militant protest, lobbying local councillors and sometimes legal action. Although community leaders use mass media and interpersonal communication as forms of communication, they are also increasingly relying on mobile phones for organizing mobilization activities. Mobile phones have thus transformed the communicative ecology of many townships and as Skuse and Cousins (2008) opine, mobile phones have been integrated into local communication and social networks.

Mobile phones as tools for mobilization
The Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, like other social justice movements in South Africa, uses the Internet in combination with traditional forms of media activism such as leaflets, press statements and posters. The movement has a website (www.aec.org.za) which collates press statements, articles written about the movements and statements of
solidarity. In addition, the Campaign uses Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Increasingly, however, members of the Campaign are using mobile phones as tools for mobilization in three main ways as discussed in the following sections.

Organizational efficiency

Mobile phones have increased the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign’s organizational efficiency and have significantly lowered costs and obstacles of organizing collective action. As stated earlier, the Campaign has no central ‘office’ and mobile phones have introduced flexibility, rapid mobilization and closer contacts among the more than 15 affiliates of the movement. The Chairperson and Secretary of the movement are able to pass on important information to community leaders in a relatively short space of time as stated by the Secretary of the Campaign:

I think mobile phones have changed the way we work because the mere fact is that nowadays we can SMS and call each other more frequently and also it assists in many dilemmas such as mobility. The way Cape Town is built it’s very broad, it takes a lot of roads to get to one place and taking taxis sometimes is very difficult because you have to travel from A to B to C so with mobile phones we can frequently help each other. (Interview, 16 April 2010)

Thus, texting has become an important practice used by the Campaign leaders to reach their geographically dispersed members to mobilize for action or inform members of important information.

Accessing the web

Anti-Eviction Campaign community leadership also uses mobile phones to access the Internet, albeit to a limited extent. The Secretary of the movement, for instance, who before becoming active in the Campaign, was a community media journalist, uses her mobile phone and sometimes an Internet café located in her area to send updates to the Campaign website volunteer editor. According to an interview with the volunteer editor, there is evidence that there is a growing number of community members that are tagging comments on the website through mobile phones. Some members also follow events in the Campaign through Facebook and Twitter, though this number is quite small. At the time of writing this article, the Campaign’s Facebook page had 391 ‘friends’, 543 Twitter followers and 598 tweets. One of the affiliates of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, the Mandela Park Backyarders, has also established its own website, Twitter and Facebook pages, which are quite active, 205 Facebook ‘friends’ and 1046 followers on its Twitter pages at the time of conducting this research. The messages on the Facebook range from press statements, messages of solidarity to events announcements. The use of social media through mobile phones can be supported by statistics that show that they are approximately 10- to 12-million WAP-enabled cell phone users in South Africa, and Goldstuck (2010) reports that for 450 000 users’ mobile phones are the primary form of access to the Internet. Kreutzer (2009) in a study which surveyed 500 young people in deprived townships of Phillipi and Khayelitsha in Cape Town found that at least 83% of those surveyed accessed the Internet through their mobile phones. He also reveals that 93% of the Grade 11 learners reported having used the Internet on mobile phones, with 68% using their phones for Internet access on a typical day, opposed to 39% using computers. In a related study, Donner and Gitau (2009), in a research with relatively low-income mobile users in Cape Town, found that most of them accessed the Internet through their mobile phones and many of them had never used a PC.
Building collective identity and social capital

Although mobile phones have not replaced traditional forms of protest such as rallies and demonstrations, they complement them in terms of building collective identity and reinforcing solidarity among movement members. Collective identity ‘defines boundaries of who is in within a group, what the group believes, how the group sees the world, and ultimately helps to establish trust, which is essential in getting members to take actions that may be time consuming, uncomfortable or even dangerous’ (della Porta and Diani 2000, cited in Wall 2007, p. 261). This is not to suggest that the Anti-Eviction Campaign has no notions of collective identity offline. Although there are power and gender dynamics and contradictions within the Campaign (see Miraftab and Wills 2005, Oldfield and Stokke 2006), a sense of collective identity is engendered within the Campaign through a sense of shared struggles, goals and a history of collective action. New media technologies, specifically mobile phones, have assisted to re-frame relationships between Campaign leadership and the members. Spatial constraints imposed by geographical distances have been minimized. Demonstrations, rallies and community meetings in the Anti-Eviction Campaign are increasingly being organized through mobile phones allowing for easy communication and connections between members. Literature on new media technologies and social movements posits that the horizontal and non-hierarchical nature of these technologies allow for fluid construction of collective identity (e.g. Polleta and Jasper 2001).

Mobile phones have also created social capital by establishing communicative connections between members located in different townships. The importance of building and maintaining social networks in a diverse and spatially disconnected movement as the Anti-Eviction Campaign is critical to effecting mobilization. The term social capital refers to the ‘ability to secure benefits through membership in networks and other social structures’ (Portes 1998, p. 6). Mobile phones help people overcome interaction difficulties caused by spatial separation, which facilitates the obtaining of various kinds of support. For instance, when an eviction is taking place, the family concerned or neighbours will send an SMS to a community leader to ask for assistance as the following SMS indicates:

Hi I am in desperate need of help. I am kicked out of my granny home because she passed away, the lawyers sold the house. Me and my wife have no place to go. Can someone help us please? We stay in Ravensmead. (SMS sent on 5 August 2010)

Once these kinds of posts are read by Campaign leadership, some form of action is urgently put in place. Before the mobile phones became widespread, sending this kind of information was difficult. Mobile phones are to a great extent used to mediate links with community members. SMS texting amongst community leaders and members has resulted in more efficient forms of organization and community mobilization against evictions.

Digital divides and the re-shaping of the mobile phone

While the liberalization of the telecom sector in South Africa has resulted in cheaper mobile phone handsets, costs of maintaining a mobile phone still remain high. Despite the challenges of costs and access, Anti-Eviction Campaign members, through different practices, have re-shaped the mobile phone to suit their daily realities and still use the technology to achieve their mobilization aims. Mackay and Gillespie (1992, p. 699) posit that people redefine and customize the functional purposes of technologies or ‘even invest idiosyncratic symbolic meanings in them’. This is evident in how the mobile phone across the continent has been re-appropriated to carry different meanings for its users that defy its original intended purpose. While in the developed world, the mobile phone is used mainly as a communication tool,
in Africa it is used for a multiplicity of purposes. Therefore, mobile phones cannot be viewed only as devices to communicate, but also as material objects used for different social, cultural and economic needs of people (e.g. Horst and Miller 2006, Alzouma 2008, De Bruijn et al. 2009). A number of mobile phone practices by the Anti-Eviction Campaign, that speak to the re-shaping of the mobile phone, ranging from ‘flashing’ to ‘shared access’ were identified during field work as discussed in the following sections.

‘Flashing’ and ‘Please call me’

South Africa has one of the highest tariff rates in the world (Smith 2009). As a result, the majority of people in poor communities cannot afford to buy air time frequently. As Wasserman (2011, p. 149) states, it is poor customers in South Africa using pay-as-you-go services rather than contracts that are the hardest hit by extremely high rates charged by mobile phone companies. In a focus group discussion with Anti-Eviction Campaign members in Gugulethu, it was stated that in order to serve units, many members resort to flashing or the ‘please call me’ option to get in touch with community leaders, who in most cases have access to airtime and in a position to call back. In turn the leadership also uses a combination of SMS and ‘please call me’ to coordinate within community structures and mobilize community members for protest action. Shifting the burden of payment in this manner and at no cost to the requesting party can be a critical factor in enabling the two sides to communicate. Community members use ‘please call me’ within their community structures where the leaders’ mobile phone number is known. Often, these calls are made, for instance, to verify dates for protests, to request urgent action when an eviction is taking place or just to connect with other members.

Convergence cultures and multi-directional dissemination of information

Mobile phones are also being used by the Anti-Eviction Campaign in combination with other off-line traditional mobilization strategies. Since many members of the Campaign do not have access to the Internet, the information posted on the website, especially regarding planned protest actions, is passed on to the chairpersons and coordinators through community meetings or mobile phones. In turn the leaders spread the information through word of mouth in the form of door-to-door announcements, community meetings, rallies and sometimes loudspeakers on moving vehicles. This form of communication is reminiscent of the two-step flow of communication theory. The theory, based on empirical studies done on the process of decision-making during American presidential elections in the 1950s suggested that mass media effects were indirect and that information from the media moved in two distinct stages/steps. The first step was from the media to opinion leaders. The second step was from the opinion leaders to others in the community (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, Katz 1957). The two-step flow theory was criticized for being too linear and multi-step theorists such as McQuail and Windhal (1993) argued that opinion leaders may obtain their information other than through the mass media – through interaction with other opinion leaders who then disseminate the information to their followers (when this happens, the two-step flow then becomes a multi-step). This practice is exemplified by the Chairperson of Newfields Village, an affiliate of the Anti-Eviction Campaign, who state:

The Anti-Eviction Campaign holds public meetings every second Sunday. The co-ordinators of each community anti-eviction campaign inform each other of the public meeting via mobile text messages, then each co-ordinator informs their community through word of mouth, mainly through door-to-door. (Personal interview, Chairperson of Newfields Village, 16 April 2010)
Most social movements in Africa have resorted to using the SMS bulk software Frontline SMS to coordinate their activities and send information to members in a timely fashion. However, as Loudon (2010) notes in a study of ICT use by the Treatment Action Campaign, operations such as bulk SMS and hotlines are often implemented and funded by external donors. Since the Campaign has resource constraints and its community leaders have little access to a PC and are circumspect about receiving donor funds, some of its members have come up with an innovative way of sending information to the community en mass and sharing mobile phone numbers within the community. The leadership in Newfields Village, for instance, is using innovative ways to connect community members. The community has put together a CD containing a photograph of one member of the family (usually the parent or breadwinner), address and mobile phone numbers. The CD has been copied and sent to each house unit in the Village, which totals 420 units. According to the coordinator of Newfields Village Anti-Eviction Campaign, most of these units have a DVD player and can thus access these details. The purpose of the CD is to ensure that community members know each other and can alert each other about impending evictions, electricity cut-offs and planned protest actions. Although the Coordinator does not have bulk SMS software, he has collected a lot of mobile phone numbers which he has arranged in ‘groups’ in his mobile phone contact folder. When he wants on an urgent message related to action, he sends an SMS.

The Anti-Eviction Campaign also uses traditional mobilization methods such as rallies, songs, dancing, picketing and toyi-toying (a militant form of dance and protest that was popular during the Apartheid struggle) which are sometimes captured on mobile phones by movement leadership and posted on the website. The combined effect of these modes of communicating point to convergence culture, which, according to Jenkins (2006), is blurring the lines between the old and new media. This indicates that viewing ICTs as presenting a complete break with the past ignores or neglects the way in which old and new media converge (Wasserman 2011) and thus mobile phones do not, on their own, have direct transformative powers on protest movement.

Shared and public access

In Africa, the phenomenon of mobile phone sharing is quite common (see Burrell 2010, Vodaphone 2005, Skuse and Cousins 2008). One mobile phone is often shared and used by family and neighbours. Some people buy a SIM card without a mobile phone handset and will borrow someone else’s phone to use the card. There is also commercial sharing of mobile phones services that are available to people after payment. In the townships visited for this study, there was a lot of phone sharing between neighbours in cases where one has no airtime or mobile phone handset. Delft Symphony Way Temporary Relocation Area and some parts of Gugulethu have no access to electricity and as such residents wishing to charge their mobile phones have to rely on social networks within the Campaign. Due to limited time of the study, it was not ascertained how this sharing impacts on mobilization. However, it can be deduced that the practice of sharing mobile phones could lead to what Southwood (2008) calls ‘less walk and more talk’ (cited in Wasserman 2011, p. 149) as more and more people become connected.

Conclusion

The article has investigated mobile phone practices by the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign. It shows that as a mobilization tool, the mobile phone has facilitated three processes – organization efficiency, accessing the web by movement members and
strengthening collective identity among members. Despite the existence of different levels of the mobile digital divide, there has been creative appropriation of mobile phones such as ‘beeping’, sharing of mobile phones and mixing use of the mobile phone with old traditional mobilization methods. Using theories of domestication and technological constructivism, these practices speak to the social shaping of technology by members of the Campaign.

The article has also shown that mobile phones have not replaced traditional ways of mobilization in the Anti-Eviction Campaign, they have merely enhanced them. Face-to-face communication, door-to-door contacts, pamphlets, co-exist with mobile phones. The interconnections that occur across a broad range of mediated and non-mediated interactions between social actors in the Campaign create a powerful mobilization force. The argument that new media technologies amplify traditional methods of protest provides strengths to the constructivism and social shaping of technology being advocated in this article. The emerging literature on mobile phones and activism, especially in the wake of the revolutions in Northern Africa in early 2011, is largely shaped by reductionist and deterministic approaches to technology (e.g. Bohler-Muller and Van Der Merwe 2011). Although mobile phones do mediate the organization of activism for social change in repressive countries, we should not elevate their power over other off-line political processes. As McAdam et al. (1996) state, indispensable interpersonal networks cannot simply be replaced by new media technologies.

As this research narrowly involved interviews and focus group discussions and not a prolonged ethnographic study, subtle nuances of meaning that structure the communities’ everyday lived experiences were not effectively captured. Thus the findings and arguments presented in this article are preliminary and invite the need for further ethnographic and anthropological research on mobile phone appropriation by social and community-based movements in South Africa.

Notes
1. The Delft-Symphony ‘Temporary Relocation Area’ (TRA) has an estimated 1600 one-room units made from shiny corrugated iron structures and has been nicknamed ‘Blikkiesdorp’ (Tin Town) by residents who see the structures as no better than their own shacks. The residents of this temporary area were moved from the Joe Slovo informal settlement in 2007 to make way for the N2 Gateway Housing project.
2. Silvertown and Newfields Village are townships in Cape Town that face many house evictions and lack of service delivery. The majority of the residents are of mixed race.
3. M-Pesa is an innovative payment service for the unbanked. ‘Pesa’ is the Swahili word for cash; the ‘M’ is for mobile (see Hughes and Lonie 2007)
4. A Spaza shop is an informal convenience shop business in South Africa, usually run from home.
5. Khayelitsha (Xhosa name for new home) is Cape Town’s largest townships. The Anti-Eviction Campaign was born in one of its poorest sub-sections, Mandela Park. Phillipi is also one of the poorest townships in Cape Town with a largely mixed-race (coloured) population.
6. FrontlineSMS is a free open software used to distribute and collect information via text messages (SMS). The software works with a computer and cell phone.
7. In fact, while I was interviewing him, he sent an SMS to members in Newfields Village, reminding them of a protest taking place the next day. Posters of the event had been sent to members earlier.

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