FCJ-082 The Models and Politics of Mobile Media

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Introduction

In this paper I seek to critically evaluate the models at play in an important area of new media cultures — mobile media. By 'mobile', I mean the new technologies, cultural practices, and arrangements of production, consumption, and exchange, associated with hand-held, networked devices, especially those based on mobile cellular networks. These mobile phone technologies are now commonly being framed as media (May & Hearn, 2005; Nilsson et al., 2001; Goggin & Hjorth, 2007) — and so we see the appearance of objects such as mobile television, mobile film, mobile games, and mobile Internet.

With its large cultural and commercial claims, this much-heralded move raises important theoretical and political questions. There is an extensive literature on various aspects of convergence, including mobiles, however systematic consideration has not been given to mobile media as a development centring on cellular mobile network technologies. Perhaps one of the difficulties in doing so is the shift of concepts that underlies these changes. While it is easier to isolate and establish the kinds of models used to imagine the mobile phone, there is a complex and dynamic interplay of various models shaping mobile media.

To zero on what is at stake in the shift from mobile phone to mobile media, I want to focus upon three distinct, if related, models. Analysis of these models is helpful to understand the transformations in mobile media. It also helps to cast light on the scene of new media in general. Respectively these three models revolve around: phones; commons; publics.

Phones

To risk a generalization the concept of the telephone took at least a century to develop, achieving firm social, cultural, technological, and commercial stability by the middle of the twentieth century. There is a select but rich literature on the telephone, and social implications (Fischer, 1992; Katz, 1999; Pool, 1977). As a new communicative architecture based on conversations, the telephone became incorporated into various media. For instance, there was the use of the telephone in talk (or talkback) radio (Gould, 2007; Phillips, 2007). The telephone become important for viewers to interact with television (c. Pool, 1973), in what some decades later came to be called participation television (Goggin & Spurgeon, 2008; Nightingale & Dwyer, 2006).

The concept of the telephone broadened with the emergence of telecommunications, and the rise of data communications networks. Later the telephone became an important model for thinking about new media, especially in cultural theory (as for example in Ronell, 1989). With the emergence of telecommunications came the concomitant acknowledgement of the importance of this form of communications in social and political life. Across the world various national governments explicitly endorsed telecommunications as an important public good that should be extended to all citizens within the boundaries of a country, what was captured in the US, and later Australia also, as 'universal service' (Mueller, 1997; Wilson and Goggin, 1993) and in Europe as an important 'public service' (Garnham, 1997). With the dismantling of state provision of telecommunications in the 1980s and 1990s, and the restructuring of markets under a neoliberal dispensation, came the debates about universal service and universal access that remain unresolved. In the model of the telephone, it could be argued, are inscribed certain ideas of the user (as the subscriber), the citizen, the governmental, and the public — to which I will return.

A shift in the notion of the telephone, and telecommunications, also developed with the emergence of the portable mobile telephone. The mobile phone slowly developed from its beginnings in wireless telegraphy, and radiotelephony, to take its familiar form as cellular mobile telephony in the 1980s and 1990s. Mobile phone culture comes with the global diffusion of second-generation digital mobiles in the 1990s, and their affordances and practices (Goggin, 2006). Text messaging (SMS) represents a transition object between mobile voice telephony and the use of mobiles in culture and media.

Often the transformations underway in cellular mobile platforms are viewed as a simple extension of what is occurring in the Internet, and indeed an instance of the mobile more and more resembling the Internet and computer. There is some truth to this. However it also fails to

understand the specificity of mobile cultures, and how they remain in important ways modelled on the telephone. So while the concept of the telephone has changed, not least with the advent of telecommunications, with the restructuring of the same, and with the socio-technical invention of the mobile phone, it remains an important model for thinking about new media. The power of the telephone model is still clearly evident in the realm of policy, regulation, and political economy, as well as the new spheres of digital cultures.

Commons

9 From the telephone, I wish now to turn to the model of the commons, which has been important for figuring new media. The commons debate has served to constellate a set of crucial propositions about value, democracy, and openness regarding the emergent platforms of contemporary culture. The contemporary reinvigoration of the doctrine of the commons, especially led by the work of a number of legal scholars, such as Lawrence Lessig (2001), has also seen the engagement of audiences outside specialist academic and policy settings — not least in the generation of the creative commons movement (https://creativecommons.org/). While there are limitations to and problems with modelling new media through the concepts of the commons, it does offer an important perspective on the nature of digital technologies, their economies, and social and cultural relations.

10 Perhaps the most important reason for the influence of the commons is that its correlate is the Internet. Particular aspects of Internet technologies, platforms, applications, cultures, and layers are valorized by proponents of the commons — and these exemplary cases taken from the Internet serve to underpin the normative claims a number of commons theorists make for general notions of society, economic, ethics, and justice. What I wish to do in this paper is to suggest that the commons could be useful to understand what is going on in mobile and telecommunications network — and also to observe that to date there has been very little systematic work along these lines.

11 Firstly, commons theorists have not really grasped or grappled with mobile networks. If they do discuss mobile networks, these are seen as leading exhibits of 'enclosed', proprietary networks, locked down for non-market, public, or creative use by telecommunications companies and handset and device manufacturers. Secondly, when commons theorists — or indeed theorists with coeval accounts of the importance of Internet culture, co-creation, creative innovation– consider mobile networks, they see the real possibilities of openness coming from the ability of mobile devices to access wireless technologies, such as Wi-Fi or Wi-Max. In another move mobile devices gain their meaning and possibilities for openness by being placed in the universe of the social, collaborative media of Web 2.0. Thirdly, the idea of the Internet that many of the leading commons theorists use is based on a quite specific experience of the Internet in North America, oriented around fast bandwidth, the wide availability and affordability of PCs, and the particular educational, work, home, and public settings of computing, Internet, and cell phone use.

12 Despite the fact that the Internet is taken to be the eminently global medium, and indeed is now a place where languages other than English dominate its users, the dominant understandings of the Internet in the Anglophone world do not reflect this (Danet and Herring, 2007; Goggin and McLelland, 2008). In addition, the Internet is a mobile experience for many users — Japan and Korea being two quite different countries where this is clearly so (for instance, see Ito, Okabe and Matsuda, 2005). Much of the world's population has access to television, and now cell phones – but personal computers and reliable, comprehensive Internet access are not so widely diffused. I am not suggesting that we now valorize mobiles over Internet, but rather that we recognize, as we are often exhorted to do, the interrelations between these two technological systems, and also to place these in general ecologies of media, communications and technologies. To elaborate on these opening remarks, I'll now turn to a discussion of commons, briefly discussing wireless, then mobiles.

Wireless and Internet versus Mobile Commons

13 What the considerable literature on, and activity in pursuit of, the commons highlights with great clarity and urgency are the struggles underway about the shape and characteristics of the digital environment; which is to say — especially once the denotative and connotative power of the digital fades away — the future of media. We can see this clearly in perhaps the most elaborated and

lucid recent account of the commons, Yochai Benkler's 2006 The Wealth of Networks (Benkler, 2006).

14 Benkler argues that recent transformations have 'created new opportunities for how we make and exchange information, knowledge, and culture', and have 'increased the role of nonmarket and non-proprietary production, both by individuals alone and by cooperative efforts in a wide range of loosely or tightly woven collaborations' (2). For Benkler, software, video, new kinds of investigative reporting, and multiplayer online games are leading examples. While these possibilities will hopefully yield a 'open, diverse, liberal equilibrium' (22), Benkler is also concerned about a dystopian outcome: '[The] central question is whether there will, or will not, be a core common infrastructure that is governed as a commons and therefore available to anyone who wishes to participate in the networked information environment outside of the market-based proprietary framework' (23). Benkler singles out two particular threats (or 'enclosure' movements) to a commons, the 'enclosure movement' around intellectual property and digital rights management, and the concentration of market structure for broadband wires and connections. In the case of broadband, there have been some countervailing forces, according to Benkler:

15 > The emergence of open wireless networks, based on 'spectrum commons', counteracts this trend to some extent, as does the current apparent business practice of broadband owners not to use their ownership to control the flow of information over their networks. (25)

16 Elsewhere I have discussed Benkler's valorization of open wireless networks, with their ability to create alternative communication and computational structure, and so offer a real alternative to 'enclosed' broadband networks (Goggin, 'Australian Wireless Commons', 2007). As I note, what is exemplary about Benkler's utopian rendering of wireless communication is its contrast with mobile cellular technologies:

17 > The development of open wireless networks, owned by their users and focused on sophisticated general-purpose devices at their edges also offers a counterpoint to the emerging trend among mobile telephony providers to offer a relatively limited and controlled version of the Internet over the phones they sell. (Benkler, 2006: 404)

18 Benkler sees a conflict between the open, wireless networks and closed mobile ones, in which the only hope for a vision of a commons lies in the extent to which phone vendors 'build into the mobile telephones the ability to tap into open wireless networks, and use them as general-purpose access points to the Internet' (405). The outcome of this friction between wireless and mobiles and their inscription in devices, along with the question of whether users will be prepared to carry another wireless device alongside their mobile phone 'will determine the extent to which the benefits of open wireless networks will be transposed into the mobile domain' (405).

19 Leaving aside the lack of recognition of the quite different tradition and concepts telecommunications carries with it (that I have suggested are being used to model mobile media), I now wish to turn to consider mobiles from a commons perspective. Surprisingly, while there have been many attempts to theorize the Internet from the perspective of a commons (indeed, as I have noted, the Internet has not only been seen as a prized instance of the commons, but it has served to model the commons itself), I can find only few mentions of mobile commons.

20 There is a Canadian mobile digital commons network, which broadly aligns itself with commons movements across digital culture (https://www.mdcn.ca/tiki-view_articles.php) but within its work thus far (which includes the journal Wi) there is no specific thinking through of mobile commons. Otherwise there is little work on mobile commons explicitly, but there is a fair amount of cognate work aiming to open up mobile platforms. Here one finds critiques, typically with the Benklerian flavour, of counterposing the open, public Internet, with the comparatively highly controlled nature of mobile platforms (Rheingold, 2002; Sawhney, 2005). In addition, within the open source and free software movements, there is important work underway to develop concepts and tools for mobile platforms. For example, an early effort to open up mobile technologies, making them available for user experimentation, was undertaken by the Manchester-based art collective, the-phone-book that offered workshops on re-programming mobile phones (https://www.the-phone-book.ltd.uk/).

21 To summarize my argument so far: the commons has provided an influential model for new media, especially in North America, but around the world it has been used, precisely and loosely,

to imagine the digital environment, its struggles and politics. Typically mobile phones and mobile media have been seen as a blockage or dystopian instance, where the commons is very far from applying. Hence typically we can observe two conceptual moves. Firstly, mobile data protocols and applications are contrasted disapprovingly with the open, public Internet. Secondly, cellular mobile networks are contrasted unfavourably with wireless networks, based on the Wi-Fi (802.11) or Wi-Max standards. These two conceptual moves have not, in my estimation, led to focussed attention upon contesting forms of control, and opening up, of mobile platforms — in the same way that we see with the various commons movements in the Internet (though clearly concepts and tools from, say, creative commons, apply to mobiles). Where there has been work on the politics of mobile code, as I have suggested, is in a range of activity from open source and free software movements, artistic and independent cultural production communities. In this light, what I wish to do now is to open up this topic of the mobile commons.

Modelling a Mobile Commons

22 So, what would a mobile commons look like? If there is an actual, or looming, enclosure of mobile platforms, what forms does this take exactly? There are various ways of conceptualising the layers or levels of technology, but I would suggest regarding mobiles, there are at least five loci of control.

Handsets and devices

23 Broadly speaking mobiles comprise a handset or device and a Subscriber Information Management (SIM) card. SIM cards carry information on the address (phone number) of the device, as well as account information (Vedder, 2001). In theory, as we know, a SIM card can be taken from one device, and inserted into another to switch an account and user identity across devices. Clearly the SIM card is something under the control of the phone company or service provider, and is difficult for a user to modify — as it articulates the user into two important systems in which security is key. Firstly, there is connection to the telecommunications network. Here addressing is provided by telephone numbers, instead of, or as well as, Internet protocol addresses. Secondly, the SIM card connects the device to the account, subscriber management, and billing systems of the mobile operator. In most cases, it is only possible to use one SIM card with each device. I have, however, seen a marvellous example of the technology being appropriated by low-end modification: in the Philippines the small mobile vendors and do-it-your repairers who have tiny shops in most towns, can affix an additional sim card holder on the inside of the case of the mobile phone. This allows the insertion of an additional SIM card, so the user can switch between two network providers, depending on location or preference.

24 If the SIM card is a crucial gateway to the activation of the device and access to mobile networks, so too can controls be applied at the level of the device. The most obvious such control is the locking of the phone to a particular network provider. So a user who purchases a phone on a low-cost plan from a provider often has their phone 'locked' to the original provider's network. It cannot be modified, and used on another network without the payment of a fee (or the unauthorized modification and removal of the lock).

25 While the user is free to use many functions of the device offline, whether clock functions, camera, games, music, radio, storage, or program functions, the activation of the device onto the network lies significantly in the gift of the mobile operator. The systems of access and control that govern the connection of the phone, or mobile device to the network, bear the hallmarks of the regimes of telecommunication. Now many mobile devices also have Wi-Fi capability, and so are able to connect to the Internet directly, through wireless hotspots. In the future, devices are likely to incorporate other network access capabilities, notably Wi-Max.

26 The other major way that the user can connect to a network is using the Bluetooth protocol. The Bluetooth protocol allows the user to connect her phone to other Bluetooth-equipped devices, including computers, cameras, and printers, and to exchange and share files. The Bluetooth protocol only works over a relatively short range. However, it has emerged as a significant force in new cultures of use and user innovation. Recent research has shown that the sharing of music and images via Bluetooth is an important part of consumption of mobiles of young users, for instance in the United Kingdom and Germany (Haddon, 2007; Schulz, 2007). (Bluetooth is also being used by commercial forces to hail or connect to users, as in the phenomenon of advertising that uses

the protocol to interact with mobile phone users when they are in the vinicity of a billboard or shop.) The interesting thing about Bluetooth networks, of course, is that they are very casual, short-term, opportunistic, and formed from contacts in close promixity — an unstable and felicitous performance of network and space. Bluetooth networks are also quite unregulated, in contrast to cellular mobile networks and the Internet (something that is starting to raise concerns, as the use of Bluetooth via mobiles is becoming visible as an activity, especially in teenagers and young people).

27 The domestication of mobiles that Bluetooth highlights is a general framing of the technology. So, despite the relatively closed nature of handsets and access that I have just mentioned, there has been considerable user innovation, most obvious in the phenomenon of customization and personalization of phones through ornaments, changeable faces on phones, wallpapers, and ring-tones (Hjorth, 2005). This kind of innovation is a classic instance of consumer culture, where users rely on commercial availability of objects, products, or services to domesticate their devices. It is important to acknowledge this creative force in mobile consumption, because it may contribute to the achievement of a commons — but might also point to a different kind of model of mobile media.

28 Before I discuss the next level of mobile technology and control, I want to briefly note the launch of the Apple iPhone in July 2007. At the time of writing in March 2008 the iPhone was still only officially available in North America and Europe, but it certainly was attracting much excitement. The thrill of anticipation comes from the idea of a Apple design makeover of the cell phone. Also perhaps from the direct confrontation of the assumptions of computing world with those of the mobile handset manufacturers and telecommunications. Early indications are that the iPhone offers some new possibilities in terms of openness, but, like the iPod, quite some restrictions too. The user of the iPhone needs to be a customer of AT&T, and then connects to their second-generation GSM mobile network. Apple's documentation and advertising carries stern warnings about users re-programming their iPhone to connect to other networks. The iPhone does also promise also is access to the Internet via WiFi, but it is unclear that this device offers any advantages in terms of access (rather than user interfaces and design) over its traditional cell phone competitors.

29 The fascinating thing about the reception of the iPhone has been the rapidity, fluency and enthusiasm with which users have hacked the device. There are iPhone users in various part of the world where Apple has not yet officially launched the device, such as Australia. Users buy the iPhone overseas, use widely available instructions and software to hack the phone, and then connect it to the mobile provider of their choice. The hacking of the iPhone is a phenomenon in its own right, which has advanced the cause, and raised the stakes, of openness in mobile media.

Network installation and interoperability

30 People in rural areas have often installed their own telephone lines to connect to the phone system, for instance in Australia and more extensively in the US. However the particular technical characteristics and affordances of mobile network transmission, switching, and digital encoding make it difficult for individuals or loosely-coordinated communities to set up their own networks — in the way, for instance, that activist and community enthusiasts of Wi-Fi do. While there do exist community networks around cellular mobiles, these require a deal of co-ordination, capital, and collaboration with wholesale network providers and operators to be successful.

Operating systems and software

31 Like computers, cell phones use operating systems and software. The operating systems have mostly been proprietary, notably the Symbian operating system. It is fair to say that there has been less awareness of, and less resistance to proprietary operating systems, and development of alternative, than we see in the open source software movements around computing and Internet. Similarly, most software used on mobile phones is proprietary; for instance, licensed versions of popular computing software, such as Microsoft Office or Acrobat Reader, developed for handheld and mobile devices such as Smart Phones, Portable Digital Assistants, and Blackberries (see https://www.microsoft.com/windowsmobile/). There is a range of software commercially developed and available for mobiles, ranging from the expected office and business applications to new private sphere opportunities such as surveillance of children or employees:

> ‘Mobile Spy: Reveal the Truth in Real Time’
>
> Are your children or employees abusing the privileges of your Windows Mobile based smartphone? Are you worried they are using the phone for unallowed or inappropriate activities?
>
> Mobile Spy will reveal the truth for any company or family. You will finally learn the truth about their call, mobile web and text message activities by logging into your Mobile Spy account from any computer.
>
> (https://www.mobile-spy.com/spy_features.html)

Recently, there has been growing interest in the use of Linux systems for mobiles, with the first international conference held in November 2006 on the business case and technology choice for all open source in mobiles, but especially Linux and open source Java (https://www.linuxdevices.com/news/NS4240520603.html). There are quite successful software initiatives for mobiles, notably Opie (Open Palmtop Integrated Environment), developed by Trolltech (https://trolltech.com/). Opie forms part of Trolltech’s comprehensive Qtopia Phone Edition applications platform (https://trolltech.com/products/qtopia/phone_edition)

In addition, there are now organizations dedicated to promoting and developing open source software for handhelds such as handhelds.org (which also has a concentration on wearable computers).[1] As is evident, much of the initial activity has centred upon handheld computing devices and PDAs, rather than classic cell phones, though now with the advent of Smart Phones and mobile media the open software community is tackling mobiles. For its part Nokia, as one of the most forward looking mobiles companies, and certainly one that seeks to keep abreast of, draw upon, and collaborate with (or even co-opt) alternative design and creative developments, launched an open source portal for developers in November 2005 (https://www.opensource.nokia.com/; Nokia, 2005).

Control of channels & content

Though the introduction of mobile cellular networks in the 1980s was crucial to the introduction of competition in telecommunications, and the opening of markets, telecommunications carriers still play a dominant role in controlling access to mobile platforms.

Despite interconnect agreements and competition rules, carriers are still able to restrict options for service providers to offer commercial content (videos, downloads, and so on, being areas where clearly third-party content providers and aggregators do have a viable and lucrative business). Thus with the emergence of mobile data services, and new third-party operators (indeed some specialists in mobile services internationally such as Mobile Interactive Group or MIG; https://www.migcan.com/), there have been fierce battles fought between the carriers seeking to develop and promote their ‘portal’ (or proprietary mobile premium services) versus the content and service providers wishing to either sell products to the carriers or to access mobile platforms to sell services direct to consumers (Goggin & Spurgeon, 2005 & 2007).

As well as the industry struggles over mobile operators, new entrants (premium rate content and service providers), and also traditional broadcast interests over the shape and operation of mobile networks, there has also been considerable, if belated, governmental interest. This stems from concerns about inappropriate and inoffensive material being accessed over mobiles, especially by minors. A secondary concern has also been consumer protection issues, especially with the potential of mobile premium services to quickly yield very high customer bills (Goggin & Spurgeon, 2005). The Australian government, for instance, has undertaken a number of reviews in this area, notably the Department of Communications and Information Technology’s convergent devices review (DCITA, 2006; Dwyer, 2006; for an international comparative study, see Goggin, ‘Mobile Content Regulation’, 2007).

In these debates, there has been little discussion of the place of these new mobile data channels and services and user-generated content (for a fascinating discussion, see Feijóo et al., 2007). Theoretically, access to mobile data services, including premium mobile messaging or video services, is open to anyone with sufficient funds. For instance, the not-for-profit, charity, and non-government organization sector has been an innovative user of mobiles, as evidenced in Médicins san Frontierès use of text messaging for contacting their supporters or the enlisting of messaging by organizations in the youth sector, or by organizations working in HIV-AIDs and sexually-transmitted diseases. However, mobile networks are not often conceptualised as distribution

platforms that might be open to community, citizen, alternative, cultural producer, or artistic expression in the way that the community broadcasting movement has been successful in having channels, spectrum, and resources set aside for radio and television broadcasting. Such arguments were, however, raised in the 2007 Australian debates on mobile television, though more in the context of the nigh complete marginalisation of community broadcasters from digital television spectrum.

39 One counterbalance to the mobile operator's control of cellular mobiles comes from the use of VoIP (voice of Internet protocol) applications over mobiles. Here there are new ways for users to fashion telephony, messaging, and data connection to other individual users or groups overriding to some extent the controls of circuit switching mobile telecommunications network (at least within the limitations of VoIP software, which, for instance, allows conferencing, but with a practical limit of number of users).

Intellectual property

40 In the realm of the Internet, and digital culture generally, there is a strong trend in intellectual property towards greater claims and regimes of control, extending the theoretical and practical rights of copyright holders. Because of the stronger controls afforded to cellular mobiles, as outlined above, it is arguable that intellectual property extensions, such as digital rights management and anti-circumvention measures, could well find greater support on mobile networks, as they are currently configured, than the Internet in general.

41 Initiatives on copyright on mobile content are in their infancy, with the Open Mobile Alliance releasing a digital rights management standard in 2002, followed by version 2.0 in 2004 (OMA, 2004; see discussion in de Zwart, Lindsay & Rodrick). While the copyright issues, and one might add the user and cultural citizenship issues, are apparently clearer with mobile premium services, as a species of 'walled garden', the rapid growth of peer-to-peer, user-generated content, and content sharing, via mobiles poses a dilemma. Example of such user-generated content includes photos or video either distributed via mobiles or Internet (especially via the new distributed applications such as YouTube or MySpace), or images with a significant news value provided to mainstream newspapers, magazines, or television. As de Zwart, Lindsay & Rodrick argue, advanced digital rights management risks alienating users and copyright owners alike. Instead they call for a balanced approach, suggesting that they are ways of using current developments in intellectual property and copyright systems to better address the interests of all parties in mobile networks.

42 However, it is fair to say that such approaches would still not go far enough for a vision of mobile commons. Two measures are probably needed here: an extension of current initiatives on commons to incorporate mobile platforms; and a identification of the intellectual property and copyright issues specific to mobiles that hinder the creation and maintenance of a commons.

43 In this section of the paper, I have provided a preliminary examination of the different layers, and loci of control, of mobile networks. I think it is entirely feasible, indeed quite useful, to develop this into a full argument for a mobile commons, and also to develop a specific vision of what this might look like. One further impetus for such an argument is the movement reworking core landline telecommunications networks as well as next generation mobile networks to be substantially based on IP networks. However, this is a task for another occasion. What I would like to do now is to turn from the model of the commons and in closing consider the model of mobile publics, along with what it implies for thinking about mobile media.

Mobile Publics

44 So far I have looked at two different models of cellular mobiles that shape the imagining and the politics of what is becoming mobile media. The third model I wish to consider briefly is that of publics.

45 The meaning of the public, its relationship to audiences, and how publics historically emerge are questions given considerable attention. There are now various accounts available of how publics have emerged in relation to media forms and technologies, such as books and other artefacts of print culture, in relation to television, or in relation to the Internet. There has been a substantial body of work on publics, that seeks to develop alternatives to what is seen as the impasse of available notions, especially of the public sphere (Bennett & Carter, 2001; Kolko, 2003; Robbins,

1993; Warner, 2005). Finally, there is some specific work on mobile publics, most fully elaborated in mobilities research (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2007). Here the emphasis is on understanding how publics are now formed in more contingent, evanescent, and shifting ways that previously understood.

46 These different strands of rethinking publics could be fruitfully brought together, and given further impetus, by consideration of the formation of new mobile media publics. Consider for instance two potential new kinds of publics, centring on mobile media: tactical assemblies formed through text messaging; the new urban publics constituted by locative and mobile gaming practices.

47 Text messaging has drawn much attention because of its use in activism, protest, and dissent. The celebrated example is the overthrow of Philippines President Joseph Estrada in 2001, brought down by popular protest in which text messaging played a key role. For Howard Rheingold, this feds into the phenomena of 'smart mobs' (Rheingold, 2002), whereas for others care needs to taken to eschew the technological sublime and instead to understand the precise role of mobiles and messaging in social organising (Pertierra et al., 2002; Rafael, 2003). Heeding such cautionary notes, it is still possible to view the rich phenomenon of text messaging as being associated with new mobiles publics. There are new kinds of assemblies, related to the use of text messaging and mobiles for gathering people together, and acting in concert — and also the related use of text messaging in the subaltern political cultures of a number of countries (not least China) as an alternative channel for the circulation of news, gossip, and satire. Then there are the ways that mobile messaging is implicated in the reworking of media cultures via participation television, and new variations on existing formats of reality and quiz television.

48 My second candidate for a mobile public are the new modes of urban citizenship, belonging, and engagement that can be seen in the entwining of mobile media technologies, locative media, positioning technologies, mobile social software, and also the urban screens movement (Boeder et al., 2006). Here mobile media are playing an important role as a technology of everyday urban life. However, their significance lies in the affordances and shaping of mobile media to participate in the emergence of a new shifting public. This mobile public is networked yet clearly located; involved in communication with intimates via mobiles, but also manifest (sometimes simultaneously) in emergent communicative architectures (such as SMS projection, installation of screens, and use of mobile media modes of interactivity); interested in gaming, but across platforms, environments, and private and public lives.

49 I have probably only managed to evoke rather than adequately characterize what I have in mind as mobile publics. However, I am interested in further developing this by enhancing the distinction sometime drawn between the notion of 'public' and that of 'community'.[2] In shorthand, 'public' is a concept that gathers together strangers, or people who do not know each other, or do not wish to be strongly and intimated affiliated together. 'Community', by contrast, often has a normative sense that citizens need to be brought together in relations of identification and connection that can overcome anomie and the fate of the monad. Now this is certainly arguable, as there is considerable, and indeed fruitful, slippage, between notions of 'public' and 'community' (see also the interesting thinking about the scale of publics, in the idea of 'tiny publics' in Fine and Harrington, 2004). Yet it does have specific, suggestive resonance for thinking beyond the models of 'phone' and 'commons'.

50 I would argue that the commons engages a different account of politics, and different traditions of political theory (soundly liberal, democratic, and free market), than that of accounts of the publics (especially recent ones). So while the commons is a very useful way to diagnose some aspects of the politics of mobiles, and also to activate measures towards addressing these (as the creative commons movements show), it does not adequately engage with other dimensions of digital culture and new media — notably in the case of mobiles, the new framing of these technologies as media.

51 As I have contended, the model of 'phone' is also problematic, if still powerful. In the co-production of the telephone and the social, I would argue that notions of community were uppermost as this talking technology developed through the twentieth-century (for example, see Fischer, 1992). Yet at the beginnings of the telephone, famously in the example of the Hungarian use of the telephone for broadcasting news — the celebrated Telefon Hirmondó of the 1920s — these technologies were imagined, and shaped, as media (Marvin, 1988; see also the early Italian history

of the telephone discussed in Balbi and Prario, 2009). The other interesting thing about the telephone, especially as it shifts into the model of telecommunication, is that it is associated with a very strong sense of the public, bound up with specific, clearly defined notions of the nation-state, its boundaries, and citizens.

52 Along these lines, another way to remodel mobile media might be to draw together a critique of the commons, with a recuperation and revision of the notion of public associated with the telephone. I can only indicate this here all too elliptically, but suffice to say that it could provide a plausible way to grasp the kind of developments that are currently underway with, say, mobile television — where mobiles are being reshaped in a way that obviously connects them with problematics of publics (and audience), familiar from other traditions of media.

Conclusion

53 In this paper, I have discussed the question of models of new media by proposing the case of mobile media. As is evident from the foregoing, mobile media is quite a complicated, hybrid object, under transformation, instable, and very much subject to different constructions from different standpoints and observers. This granted, I have argued that a key model for mobile media remains the telephone. Also that this model cannot simply be replaced by that of the Internet, or at least a certain dominant figuration and thematics of Internet and digital culture.

54 A more purposeful and systematic way to think about the transformation of the model of the phone, warping into mobile phone, might be the commons. This is indeed a model that has been bound up with the Internet, and it could potentially be used to model mobile media. I offer a preliminary account of what a mobile commons would look like, at least the kinds of enclosures mobile networks and technologies could be seen to contain.

55 Pending such an elaboration of mobile commons, it is important to be mindful of the profound limits, and indeed the problematic politics of a commons approaches. Thus I indicate a third model that could be helpful in advancing a discussion of mobile media, namely that of publics. The concept of 'publics' has a number of advantages here. It is the key term in how we imagine society, information, culture, and media, as is familiar from debates on the role of newspapers or television, or indeed the possibilities of convergence and digital technologies. As I have sketched, however, mobile publics are potentially quite different in the kinds of formations, audiences, and citizenship they suggest. To talk of publics also harks back to, and provides a way to take up and re-envision the earlier model of the telephone — offering a resonant, culturally rich, and politically potent way to imagine mobile media.

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Notes

[1] Handhelds.org maintains a helpful list of all devices for which Linux ports and support exist, see https://www.handhelds.org/moin/moin.cgi/SupportedHandheldSummary

[back]

[2] For the distinction between 'public' and 'community', I indebted to a presentation by Gay Hawins and a lively discussion that followed at an ARC Cultural Research Network research roundtable on 'Communities, Publics, and Practices', held at University of Technology Sydney, 23 June, 2006.

[back]

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