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## **Read-Write-Erase: Mobile-mediated publics in South Africa's 2009 elections**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes four kinds of mobile mediated political participation observed during the 2009 national elections in South Africa: (1) SMS 'wars' in the run-up to the election; (2) .mobi websites hosted by political parties; and the political content included on (3) the mobile social network Mig33 and excluded from (4) its counterpart/competitor, MXit. We

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discuss the failure of mobile communication to support the emergence of social networks as networked or mediated publics, and consider how particular properties of the mobile internet, vs. the 'traditional' internet, are partially responsible. While mainstream political parties in South Africa failed to 'mobilize' their Obama-style campaign sites, the incumbent African National Congress's Youth League adopted an unofficial but effective mobile social network campaign in their drive to win over some of South Africa's 1.3 million youthful first-time voters, as did youth from the opposition party, Cope. We argue that expanded mobile access to public platforms for political participation and deliberation is no cause for complacency, since mobile social networks are able to raise obstacles to expression or limit audience size for users on their platforms, as happened in South Africa. A key indicator of expanded access is persistent user generated content, and whether such content or users and groups of users can be located, linked to, made public or shared with other audiences or counterpublics. This is a major policy consideration in South Africa, given inequitable patterns of access to public platforms and media, both historically and at present.

## Introduction

This paper investigates mobile mediated political participation during the 2009 national elections in South Africa, which reflected two profound changes in the global communications environment: the widespread adoption of mobile telephony in the global south (Donner, 2008), and the rise of social media (blogs, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, Twitter, etc) known collectively as "Web 2.0" (O'Reilly, 2005).

Each change has implications for political participation. Consider two archetypes: First, during the text message revolutions in the Philippines, a relatively poor population took to the streets, brandishing \$30 phones, and used tiny 160 character text messages in an effort to take down a government (Paragas, 2003; Rafael, 2003; Rheingold, 2002). Second, during the 2008 presidential elections in the United States, a relatively wealthy population took to their desktops and laptops, uploading mashed-up videos, organizing meet-ups, fundraising, and 'friending' each other on bandwidth-heavy social networking sites (Smith & Rainie, 2008).

These archetypes exaggerate the technological divide between the global north and south. Mobile social software platforms are emerging that suit the low-bandwidth environments and cost-constraints of millions of mobile-centric internet users in the developing world (Kolko, Rose, & Johnson, 2007). Diverse traditions of political participation and levels of mediatization differentiate north from south, but newly affordable technologies allow grassroots mobile networks to interconnect with the globally networked publics of the internet (Benkler, 2006).

The South Africa case demonstrates how mobile social architectures can both facilitate and curtail aspects of political participation. Some systems, notably viral and broadcast SMS messages, are ephemeral and virtually invisible to non-participants. Other systems, like mobile websites, are flexible, public, discoverable, and archivable, but are distant from everyday spaces of deliberation in most developing countries, where they also present

severe constraints on authorship for mobile-centric users. Still others are hybrid systems – mobile social applications which attract large numbers of regular users, often through instant messaging or other transient genres of talk.

The 2009 elections in South Africa show that these hybrid social networks, while opening access with one hand, bar certain kinds of participation with the other. They are not all equally accessible to marginalized communities or subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1992) struggling for social and discursive power. Members of such counterpublics are adopting mobile social networks (as they formerly adopted other media (Haupt, 2008)) both for play and subversion. Nonetheless analysis of the 2009 elections suggests that these mobile social networks did not facilitate political (at least electoral) communication, either between counterpublics and a local mediatized public sphere or globally with other networked publics. They did thus not allow for broader contestation, or for deliberation.

## South Africa

South Africa, which still suffers stark economic inequalities, is home to a vibrant startup/technology community, and is capable of rapid technological innovation. These factors, combined with high levels of mobile use, make it a particularly fruitful environment for the development and adoption of mobile social software different from both bandwidth-hungry “web 2.0” applications and the universal, basic SMS.

### *The telecom environment*

Most of South Africa’s fixed-line internet users belong to a prosperous elite. In 2008 there were an estimated 4.1 million internet users, just under 10% of the population (ITU, 2009). Relatively scarce undersea connections link Africa and the rest of the world. Consequently bandwidth (whether broadband or dial-up) is expensive for households, and is generally paid for by the megabyte, rather than in the monthly all-you-can-surf plans on offer in the US.

By contrast, the mobile phone has become nearly ubiquitous. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of mobile subscriptions per 100 people climbed from 35.9% to 90.16% (ITU, 2009), while in the same period, landline subscriptions actually declined, from 10.3% to 9.2%. As mobile penetration has increased, so has the sophistication of handsets and the pervasiveness of mobile internet. In 2008, South Africa was sixth on the list of countries served by AdMob's mobile advertising (AdMob, 2008).

Rather than, or in addition to using computers, many people access digital media and the Internet via their mobile phones (Donner & Gitau, 2009; Kreutzer, 2009). Kreutzer’s survey of students in low-income high schools in Cape Town (2009) suggests that many young urban South Africans first access the Internet via their phones. Many are unaware that they are using the Internet when using mobile instant messaging services or accessing operator content via GPRS.

A downloadable mobile instant messaging and chat application called MXit is market leader in South Africa. According to email from a MXit representative, it boasts 15 million

registered users, 13 million of whom are South African (Laura Hallam, personal communication, 14 August 2009). In other words, many more South Africans use MXit than use the traditional PC-based internet. Often, “first time” internet use is mobile, and via MXit.

MXit earns revenue from advertising, and from selling premium content through micropayments in a virtual currency. Advertisers can purchase impressions on the opening ‘splash screen’, and can pay for chatrooms where they can engage users in their campaign.

Teens first began using MXit *en masse* as a cost-saving substitute for text messages, since messages sent between individual contacts are free, other than the minimal cost of the data. Using these networks, teens find private spaces for self-reflection, friendships, and relationships away from parental supervision (Bosch, 2008). Demographics are shifting, though, and despite occasional ‘moral panics’ among concerned parents and authorities (Chigona & Chigona, 2009), MXit now attracts a wider range of users, enjoying top-of-mind awareness in the South African social mediascape (Lombard, 2009).

### ***The election***

April 2009 saw South Africa’s fourth national elections since the country’s first democratic elections in 1994. Though it was a heated contest, the outcome of the 2009 elections was never really in doubt. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) maintained its lead, winning 65.9% of the national vote (it received 62.6% in 1994, 66.4% in 1999, and 69.7% in 2004), and a majority in eight of nine provinces. This was nonetheless the first time since 1994 that the percentage of voters supporting the party had dropped. Some voters shifted their support to a new party, the Congress of the People (Cope), which received 7.4%. The official opposition, the Democratic Alliance (DA) grew from a low base, winning 16.7% of the vote, though remaining a party of the middle class and ethnic minorities.

Observers speculate that the ANC’s electoral campaign cost R400 – R500 million (approximately \$53 - \$67 million) (Butler, 2009, p. 74). The party leveraged a national network of branches and mobilized hundreds of thousands of members and volunteers (Butler, 2009, p. 73). The campaign combined sophisticated marketing strategies, door-to-door campaigning, massive rallies, and ‘community hall’ meetings. It retained traditional support bases among the rural poor, grew its support in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, and held onto many voters from impoverished urban townships, all despite deepening inequality and pervasive poverty, sluggish service delivery, evidence of government corruption, the global economic crisis, and the dramas of the ANC’s internal power struggles.

Since 2005, a faction of the ANC associated with former President Thabo Mbeki had been in conflict with another faction coalescing around his former deputy, the embattled Jacob Zuma. Zuma, a leader of humble origins, became standard-bearer of the left, in particular of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) and enjoyed considerable popular support despite facing charges of corruption and bribery. He was swept to power at the ANC’s national conference at Polokwane in December 2007, by a broad anti-Mbeki coalition which included impoverished delegates as well as disgruntled provincial leaders, businessmen, and the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). In

response to Zuma's election, and to Mbeki's ousting from office in September 2008, Cope, a new breakaway opposition party, was formed. Cope appeared to have the potential to win the support of a large number of voters, particularly from the growing black middle class. The ANC's campaign, galvanized by Cope's appearance, focused on registering new young voters, mobilizing traditional supporters, and ensuring that voters turned out in their numbers to vote in the largely peaceful elections.

The poor hold the power in South African elections (Lefko-Everett, Misra-Dexter, & Sylvester, 2009), since about half of the population still live in poverty (Southall, 2009) and most poor black voters kept faith with the ANC. The ANC campaign signified modernity as well as continuity and successfully targeted young people. Eleven percent of the electorate were new voters, 1.3 million of them young people below 30 who were voting for the first time (February, 2009, p. 48; Lefko-Everett, et al., 2009). Subject to increasingly cosmopolitan influences through globalizing media and technologies, this 'cell phone generation' were believed to be less susceptible to the characteristic South African patterns of ethnic and racial 'identity voting' (Southall, 2009, pp. 9-10), and participation had declined in previous elections (February, 2009; February, 2009). While the ANC's history as liberation movement might not have weighed as heavily with these young voters as it did with their parents, the vibrant ANC campaign nonetheless succeeded in winning many of their votes, as did the sense of a party once again committed to addressing the problems of the poor.

## **Mobile Social Media and the 2009 Election**

We introduce four elements of mobile mediated political communication that played a role in the election. Two—SMS and mobile web sites—represent the low and high-content extremes currently offered by the mobile channel. The other two—MXit and Mig33—represent low-bandwidth, mobile-specific social software applications. Although less familiar to readers outside South Africa, these two hybrid applications illustrate different approaches to mobile mediated political participation.

### ***SMS wars and the tussle for power in the ANC***

A tussle for leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) dominated South African politics in the pre-electoral period 2006 and 2007, and culminated in the party's national conference in Polokwane (16-20 December, 2007), where Mbeki and Zuma were both nominated for the position of ANC party president. The conference environment was highly charged, and, at one stage, an altercation over a system of computerized voting took centre stage, fuelled by a 'war' of SMS messages.

Conference proceedings were brought to a halt when the ANCYL, who supported Zuma, brought a motion to disallow computerized counting of votes, demanding a manual count (Lund, 2007). ANCYL delegates apparently feared that Mbeki and his supporters, who had greater access to the resources of government, could use the automated vote-counting system to skew the results in their favor. They spread SMS messages claiming that the vote-counting program had been manipulated to Mbeki's advantage (Monare, 2007).

The opposing camp was equally adept at using SMS messages to influence events during the conference. Another rumor, likely originating from the Mbeki camp, claimed that a company associated with the brother of Zuma's disgraced financial advisor had been contracted to handle and secure ballot papers. "More gost voters registered, hence insistence on manual counting. It's over. The ANC has bin hijacked," (qtd in (Monare, 2007)).

The software was not used to count the presidential votes, and Zuma was elected party president. Moreover, a 'Zuma list' of candidates for the top six offices circulated via SMS and led to the defeat of a whole swathe of Mbeki loyalists vying for top positions (Butler, 2009, p. 69). Similar text wars characterized a series of intra-ANC dramas until the party leadership ousted Mbeki from the presidency of South Africa in September 2008, just seven months before the elections.

### ***'mobi is the way forward'***

ANC Update: Now is the time for us to focus on improving people's lives, Jacob Zuma says, after NPA drops charges. For the full response go to [www.myanc.mobi](http://www.myanc.mobi)

Shortly before the National Election in 2009, the ANC sent this message to supporters who had signed up to receive updates via their mobiles. It marked a landmark in the campaign, announcing that the National Prosecuting Authority had dropped criminal charges against Zuma, who was by then the ANC's presidential candidate. It also encouraged supporters to visit the [www.myanc.mobi](http://www.myanc.mobi) website, a newer mobile version of the ANC's 'traditional' social media portal [www.myanc.org.za](http://www.myanc.org.za). The .mobi site encouraged visitors "Have your say. We are listening". One supporter posted the following message:

ANC keep up all the gud work, keep delivering. Aluta continua! .mobi is the way forward.

Mobile usage was lower than campaigners had hoped. According to Steyn Speed (2009), then the ANC's acting National Spokesperson, the mobile site attracted less traffic than the main campaign site, [myanc.org.za](http://myanc.org.za) (which had attracted 50,000 cumulative visits through May 2009). The ANC nevertheless perceived mobile to be important:

The political party or social institution that manages to use cell phones to communicate around the issues that affect people is going to reap the benefits... we still need to find out how (Speed, 2009).

The ANC social media campaign on [myanc.org.za](http://myanc.org.za) and on Facebook, YouTube, 24.com, blogs, and Twitter aimed primarily "to engage with people who aren't necessarily going to vote for [the ANC]" (Speed, 2009). The Facebook friending, blog-posting, tweeting population are influential in shaping elite online opinion, but South Africa's roughly 4 million 'traditional' internet users are not the ANC's primary constituency. To ensure a wider digital reach a mobile site was essential.

Contributors to the .mobi site declared their loyalty and love for the party, but also demanded action on issues such as unemployment and education, which concern voters,

but were neglected in party manifestos and event-driven, personality-focused election coverage (Duncan, 2009). Contributors criticized abuses, bewailed slow service delivery ('Areas under our control for 15 years without service delivery shame the organization') and volunteered their services to the organization. The unexpected threat posed by Cope formed a strong rallying point, as did attacks on the DA.

In contrast, the DA focused on building a complex, "Obama-esque" campaign website. Their mobile site ([mobi.da.org.za](http://mobi.da.org.za)) was marginal to the campaign. It neither incorporated any social features, nor made use of text-messaging to reach the majority of South African voters (Buckland, 2009).

Thus mobile-centric users were excluded from participating in the DA campaign, unless they could afford the high bandwidth costs of the mobile version of Facebook. Neither the DA nor other political parties were able to mobilize significant levels of Obama-style online participation via Facebook or their own social media sites, since their strategies focused on under-utilized conventional websites, rather than localizing social media strategies through mobile communication (Duncan, 2009).

Of the official campaign sites, the ANC .mobi site went furthest in encouraging mobile users to participate, but while the site assured users "we are listening", officials did not respond to comments on the site, even when supporters posted direct questions. In contrast, as we will show, an unofficial campaign by the ANC's Youth League used a localized version of social networking to allow mobile interaction with national leaders and to shift patterns of mobile use among its national network of supporters, albeit briefly.

### ***MXit sits it out***

Given MXit's prominence in the South African mobile communications landscape, one might expect to see it playing a role in political parties' election campaigns, much as Facebook and YouTube had featured so prominently in the Obama and McCain campaigns in the US.

But when the ANC approached MXit to host their campaign, they were refused (Speed, 2009). A MXit representative explained in an email to us that MXit was 'purely an application for communication' and did not want to be seen to endorse any particular party's policies (Laura Hallam, 2009, personal communication, 31 July 2009). MXit also sent us a copy (via email) of their content policy, which forbids "content containing religious, political and/or common social issues, such as abortion and suicide" ('Content policy [external policy] - Annexure', 2009, personal communication, 31 August 2009). Speed reconfirmed MXit's decision in an SMS to us: 'MXit said they didn't want political parties on their platform' (Steyn Speed, personal communication, 18 August 2009).

The MXit architecture allows MXit to hand-pick the messages promoted on their platform, and this, together with the size of their audience, gives them considerable editorial clout. At a meeting with us, MXit's international marketing manager explained that their editorial decisions prioritize youth-focused and interactive campaigns (Juan du Plessis, personal communication, 7 September 2009). So, for example, MXit turned down Jacob Zuma's first

Presidential State of the Nation address, but allowed other political campaigns, such as Youth Day, and sent messages from users to US President Barack Obama during his 2009 trip to Africa. Given recent media panics about the safety of MXit's young users (Chigona & Chigona, 2009), perhaps MXit Lifestyle didn't want to wander into possibly controversial territories at the time of the elections. Whatever the rationale, the absence of politically themed chatrooms on MXit on the eve of the election (or at any other time) is significant to those who look to mediated mobile social networks as new arenas for emergent publics.

Unlike recent censorship activities in Iran and China, no government officials blocked political content on MXit, nor did MXit censor individual chats between its users. However, to echo Cohen (1963) and McCombs and Shaw (1972), while MXit's actions may not have told its users what to think, they helped set the agenda by suggesting what they should think *about*. At the time of the elections, MXit's chatrooms were organised around the age and location of the users (e.g. 'teens' or 'Cape Town'), while other rooms encouraged users to explore interests defined primarily by consumption such as 'technology', 'fashion' and 'cars'. MXit does not allow user-generated content other than user-uploaded music and classified advertisements.

Most DA supporters and the well-heeled echelons of the ANC could turn to Facebook to express themselves politically. But many MXit users would be unlikely to know of that option, even if they could afford the bandwidth. By excluding politically themed chats and user generated content, MXit's content policy curtailed opportunities for public participation on the most popular 'new media' platform in the nation.

### ***The Mig33 Campaign and mobile mass meetings***

With the biggest player, MXit, on the sidelines, another mobile social network grasped the opportunity to host political debates and promote itself among mobile-savvy South African voters. Based in California, Mig33 is a mobile application which reports 20 million registered users (Marshall, 2009) of which a few million are South African (Engelbrecht, 2009). Unlike the mobile version of Facebook, Mig33 supports real-time interaction with instant messaging, and caters to phone users with text messages, VoIP, and a low-bandwidth design. Unlike MXit, Mig33 allows individual users to create public chatrooms where they can meet people with similar interests to discuss any topic of their choice, and offers users the option to craft public, searchable profiles. Another feature, unique to Mig33, is the 'stadium', supporting mass chats between leaders and up to 5000 supporters.

Mig33 invited South African political parties to use Mig33 to set up groups that would allow mobile campaigning (Engelbrecht, 2009). Mig33 allows groups to communicate asynchronously with their members through announcements, and to display lists of registered members' profiles.

The ANC, DA, Cope, and two smaller parties set up Mig33 groups. Of these, the most active users were the ANC's Youth League and Cope, although Cope's use was more sporadic, and their Mig33 group was labelled an 'unofficial site'. The ANCYL and their alliance partners sent out notices in emails and SMS messages (e.g. (Ngobese, 2009) asking members to install

Mig33. After having joined, members received notices about upcoming events, both virtual gatherings such as appearances by ANCYL leaders in the Mig33 chat 'stadium', and actual meetings such as braais (known elsewhere as BBQs, grills, or cookouts) and rallies. While not part of the official campaign, the group was carefully integrated with the ANCYL's overall campaign. The Mig33 chat rooms proved considerably more popular than the ANC'S .mobi site, possibly because young ANCYL members were accustomed to browsing the Internet on their phones, and were experienced in the practices of instant messaging and MXit chat.

Over a few months, the Mig33 ANC group had over ten thousand registered members, and the ANCYL had used the group to post 37 announcements. These notices included commentary on political events, announcements of chats with ANCYL leaders in Mig33's chat stadium, and messages designed to mobilise large crowds (e.g., 'ANCYL Katlehong Ride Braai on 05 April show your support'). Mig33 was not used by the majority of ANC members, but it appears to have succeeded in engaging a core group of young ANCYL activists and supporters during the election period. To put the numbers in context, only 700 members had joined the Facebook ANCYL group. That said, the actual number of ANC supporters on Mig33 is difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, many non-South Africans joined the group and there were also some 'spam' accounts. On the other hand, some supporters joined chats and not the group. In the weeks before the elections, there were usually one or two full ANC chatrooms.

Few members of the Mig33 group created profiles, perhaps indicating that Mig33 was a temporary supplement to their regular social networking practices, (possibly on MXit, or on Facebook). This possibility is borne out by the fact that after the election results were announced, the ANCYL use of the Mig33 group dwindled almost immediately. While a few notices were posted by the ANCYL leader, Julius Malema, the chatrooms emptied, and the site bore no traces of the lively debates, bonhomie, and dramatic conflicts which entertained, enraged and enthused participants during the election.

## Discussion

Popular narratives of the role of mobile technology in the politics of developing countries tend to emphasize moments of popular indignation transformed into mass mobilization (e.g., in (Rheingold, 2002)). Mobile devices are sometimes given too much credit for the outcomes of mass mobilizations (Miard, 2009; Rafael, 2003). Other factors also shape these mass mobilizations, such as when, for example, initial SMS reports of SARS were squashed by government-controlled mass media in China (Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007). Mobile use in the 2009 South African elections certainly does not fit the indignation/revolution model that has dominated discussion to date. The South African case suggests that we should notice 'everyday' as well as exceptional events, and that privately owned new media platforms as well as governments and populace are political players. This will allow a more nuanced, if more mundane, view of the political affordances of mobile technology.

### ***Mobile social networks as mediated publics***

boyd (2007) has suggested that online social networks only constitute a mediated public when they are characterized by four properties: *persistence*, when messages are stored indefinitely, thus becoming available for later scrutiny; *searchability*, which allows convenient keyword-based access to messages by audiences other than their original recipients; *replicability*, which allows messages to be copied and used again; and *invisible audiences*, or the larger audiences who can access the records of conversations between smaller, known groups of people. In these ways, social network sites shift social interaction away from a particular moment, and make the record of that interaction asynchronous and accessible to others outside that context.

None of the major forms of mobile mediated political communication described above fully meet boyd's criteria for social networks as mediated publics. The 160 character bullets in the SMS wars at Polokwane offer none of these features. At the other extreme, the .mobi sites offered all four, but fell short of providing profiles and 'friends lists'.

Among the newer hybrid forms, Mig33 offered access to searchable profiles and invisible audiences. But chats were not recorded, and are neither searchable nor easily replicated, thus reducing the site's value as an archive and wellspring of reusable political content.

MXit, too, did not engender a mediated public by boyd's criteria. MXit profiles are not publically accessible, and even users who are mutual contacts cannot view one another's contact lists. As discussed above, MXit had no formal venues for political participation. While friends certainly exchanged messages about politics, and many seemingly apolitical uses of popular culture or music are associated with subaltern counterpublics (cf. Haupt, 2008), these messages and discussions on MXit were not persistent, searchable, or replicable. Nor was it possible to interconnect with a broader invisible public watching, learning, assessing or contesting.

### ***Walled gardens and intermediate spaces***

Historically, public spheres have claimed to be inclusive and not to respect status differentials while effectively restricting access and participation by marginalized groups. We see this trend across all four examples of mobile use in the 2009 South African election and their failures to produce a "networked" (Benkler, 2006) or "mediated" (boyd, 2007) public. In particular, the mobile social networks still present obstacles to full democratic access, defined as the ability to use them to organize and locate counterpublics, and to accommodate local genres of grassroots political action and expression. This suggests a few significant challenges for mobile-mediated political communication.

First, the MXit example illustrates how the interaction of "walled gardens" and closely controlled user experiences can restrict access to political participation. This is not the case with all mobile applications, as the approach of Mig33 makes clear. Rather, it reveals how an institution (in this case, the privately held MXit) can exert editorial control over its users. MXit's position, as both the first and currently only Internet experience for millions of South

Africans resembles America Online's relationship with its users in the early 1990s (Patelis, 2000). Previously discernable differences between content-neutral communications providers and content-active media outlets have blurred, creating challenges for participants, analysts, and policymakers alike.

Second, the concentration of interaction on the Mig33 and MXit sites is a reminder of the distinctive genres of political communication in IM applications, as opposed to searchable, all-purpose web pages. Users were unlikely to toggle between chats and the web, and their textual 'mashups' of word of mouth and the mass media were not taken up by the mediatized public sphere. The chat on Mig33 and MXit was as fleeting as a chant or slogan heard during a streetcorner rally. Powerful in the moment, but not part of the public record.

## Conclusion

The story of mobile Internet and South African youth mobilization around the 2009 election is primarily the story of a well-funded youth movement, the ANC's Youth League (ANCYL), whose strategies appealed to impoverished young voters and helped the incumbent ANC to win the election. The organic mobile campaign of the ANCYL routed around MXit's limitations. Largely eschewing the official ANC .mobi site, they adopted Mig33, a foreign-owned platform for their campaign.

Mobile-centric political participation was elicited enthusiastically, but this interest does not appear to have been maintained after the election. Supporters were given writing-rights, but mobile participation was not interconnected with a broader public sphere, and splintered off to a separate .mobi site and transient chatrooms instead. The task of generating more sustained and democratic mobile participation will be vital for the emergence of a fully-fledged "networked" (Benkler, 2006) and "mediated" (boyd 2007) South African public.

MXit is a key actor in the local mobile Internet space and they have made low-cost interpersonal communication accessible to millions. Designed around low bandwidth users with a very low price tolerance and minimalist handsets, MXit makes a contribution of the kind that other social networks are unlikely to prioritize. Nonetheless, their editorial policies raise several important concerns. Here, an asymmetrically structured content distribution network has developed a parallel one-to-many structure for (paid) 'content', and a many-to-many structure for (free) IM. This architecture does not provide opportunities for user-generated content and other forms of public discourse and limits the range of political expression available to precisely those citizens and organizations who do not have many other ways of reaching national or international audiences. While highly motivated activists may be able to route around MXit's current limitations, as the ANCYL and Cope did when they adopted Mig33, network effects will mean that ordinary citizens are less likely to join them. If Facebook had banned Obama and McCain, what would have been the reception in the US?

For the broader and ongoing discussion about the evolution of an online mediated public sphere (Benkler, 2006; boyd, 2007), the example of the 2009 South African election illustrates both the promise and limitations of current mobile-centric platforms. It

demonstrates that mobile media offer more than the raw power of the 'smart mob' to draw a physical crowd. The extension of the ANC campaign to myanc.mobi and Mig33 illustrate the promise of extending online political participation and deliberation to a broader public. At the same time, it exemplifies how such counterpublics may be mobilized merely to amplify a brief political campaign rather than to ensure ongoing and higher levels of accountability. In particular, it suggests the distance between such mobile spaces and social network sites as accessible, archivable, and searchable mediated publics.

South Africa is an emerging 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy. Each election cycle is a milestone, and requires the country to find its footing anew, with a young and often frustrated population. Whether policy interventions are needed to open up bounded mobile social media systems, or otherwise encourage mobile social software systems to develop spaces for public discourse is a matter for further discussion in South Africa, and defies an easy description or solution. The stakes are large, but so are the difficulties associated with attempts to shape the nature of public interactions on these new platforms. Perhaps the rapid pace of technological change and the pressure of competing systems such as The Grid, Noknok, Facebook and Mig33 will ensure that soon all citizens can find spaces that afford them writing-rights for mobile-mediated online political participation. But current limitations on participation in mobile social networks are of concern to citizens, activists, NGOs, providers, political parties, and policymakers, particularly since fixed line Internet serves so few, and even television and print media primarily serve wealthier South Africans or 54.1% of the population (Duncan, 2009:298). The failures to develop a more broadly accessible mobile public sphere in South Africa's 2009 election campaign are worthy of public scrutiny, challenge and appraisal, and may require targeted steps to extend broader read-write access to the networked publics and counterpublics promised by Web 2.0.

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