PAVEMENT INTERNET AND DIGITAL INVISIBILITY IN THE MARIKANA MASSACRE

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In many parts of Africa, the term 'pavement radio' (from the French radio trottoir) has been used to describe forms of colloquial political talk in African towns and cities, wherever popular unofficial discussion of current affairs takes place, extending into popular media (Ellis, 1989; Nyamnjoh, 2005. Wasserman, 2010).

These informal political conversations are extended by mobile phones. Beyond the well-documented sites of 'Arab Spring' revolts, mobile communication helped the emergence of local citizen journalism in Southern Africa. (Mare, 2013). In South Africa, Facebook is used by a growing and influential group and is making a mark on local politics (Hyde-Clarke & Walton, 2013).

Inequality operators

Despite this flowering of popular uses of mobile internet, digital invisibility and exclusion has an equally important influence on the public sphere.

While access to phones is widespread (90% of households), most handsets are cheaper feature phones using expensive prepaid airtime.(Statistics South Africa, 2013). These are key 'digital materialities' (Leonardi, 2010) shaping participation in this context. The cost of mobile communication often effectively prohibits participation (Banks, 2010; Kreutz, 2010). High prepaid data costs mean that cloud-based 'affordances' can be unaffordable (Walton & Leukes, 2013).

Messaging apps, free Bluetooth transfers and SNS are used within embodied ecologies (Walton, Hassreiter, Marsden, & Allen, 2012). Here they extend the forms of popular discourse associated with 'pavement radio', but patterns of sharing and interaction do not always conform to Northern norms of 'networked individualism' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Given the shifting infrastructure available, we can talk of a 'pavement internet' where internet protocol and mobile data may or may not always be freely available, but where messaging and media files circulate in cheap and free, often local interactions, responding to local communicative norms.

Marikana and digital invisibility

The Marikana massacre provides a case study of subaltern refusal of digital individualism and network gatekeeping.

On 16 August 2012 , South African police shot and killed thirty four mineworkers who had embarked on a wildcat strike Marikana. Online though, miners' voices were conspicuous by their absence.

Rather than relying on 'Likes', memes or YouTube clips, miners drew on oral traditions of villages in the Eastern Cape and of the union movement. Shared experiences, traditional rituals, and the threat of violence, both internal and external, further strengthened strikers' unity.(Ledwaba, 2013). During a predecessor strike at Impala Platinum mine, a video had gone viral on phones and DVD showing a (staged) scene of scabs being forced to strip naked and toyi toyi (Chinguno, 2013)

The strikers' mobile phones are mentioned regularly in accounts of the strike, but remained switched off while the men congregated on Wonderkop. Strike leader Mgcineni 'Mambush' Noki enforced the rules - no walking around or talking on phones.(The Star, 2012)

Some journalists were allowed to take photographs and 'interview' the crowd via megaphone, but only once vetted by leaders. Journalists were also not allowed to carry their phones. Strikers preferred anonymity and even Noki was initially known to journalists only as 'the man in the green blanket'.(Saba, 2013).

Rather than a simple 'digital divide', several layers of network exclusion (Tongia & Wilson, 2007) are evident at Wonderkop.. The strikers' network gatekeeping tactics constituted a refusal of networked individualism while maintaining unity and co-ordinated action and information. Despite widespread availability of mobile phones and a 3G network at Marikana, access was limited, perhaps because given the strike, cash was even more scarce than usual. Rather than posting their commentary online, miners sent free 'please call me' messages to journalists (Mosamo, 2013).

Disconnected from networked communication and media alike strikers' perspectives were poorly represented. Social media repeated the stories of 'pack journalists' (Duncan, 2012) who gravitated towards easily accessible, English speaking sources.

Conclusion

This case study suggests explanations for the conspicuous absence of citizen media in reports of the deaths of 34 miners at Marikana. Despite the growing importance of pavement internet in South Africa, commodified network infrastructure and local discursive organisation curtail popular appropriations of mobile internet for public discourse. The case study suggests how intangible infrastructure such as network tariffs constitutes a key digital materiality which plays a role in shaping online participation and digital invisibility. Strikers also resisted networked individualism at Marikana, showing both the power and the price of other modes of organisation.

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