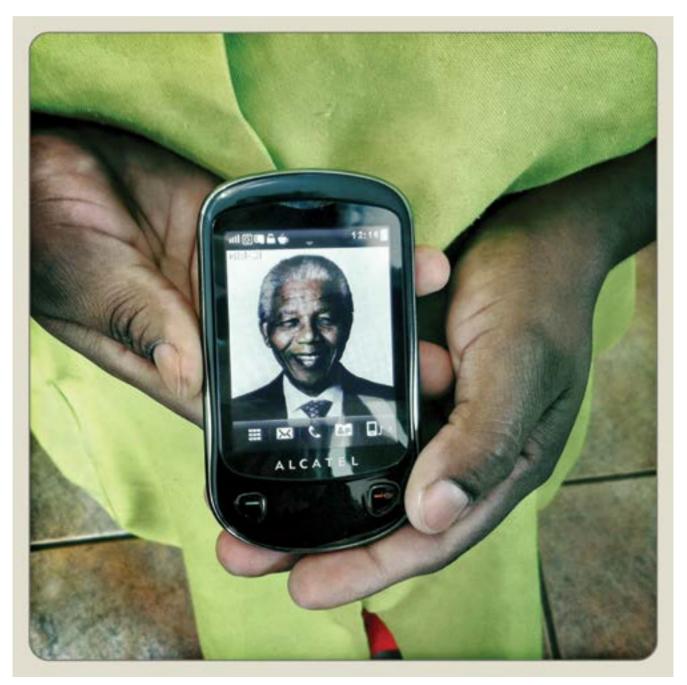# WHY CARE ABOUT SHARING?

Shared phones and shared networks in rural areas

NOSICELO FODI – HOUT BAY: from the series Life under Democracy – Dale Yudelman

Tomi Ahonen, credited with introducing the concept of mobile as the seventh mass media, notes that the arrival of the mobile phone was a God-send for advertisers, as it is the only mass medium where the audience can be accurately identified[1]. Conversely, the pervasiveness of location-aware, multi-sensor, permanently on and constantly connected devices raised privacy concerns about carrying "little brother" in your pocket at all times[2]. One of the distinctive characteristics of mobile phones, setting them apart from all previous media, is the fact that they are personal devices: 60% of married users would not let their spouse access their mobile phone and, not surprisingly, teenagers are even less inclined to let their family members have a look at their device. Things have not always been so. In South Africa, research conducted among university students[3] revealed that for many a hand-me-down phone the size of a brick and shared with siblings was their first mobile device.

By Lorenzo Dalvit

Phone sharing in various parts of Africa is well documented. Whether because of cultural reasons or financial constraints, sharing extends access far beyond official statistics[4]. As noted by Sey[5] commercial forms of sharing such as space-to-space phones in Ghana are often cited as an example of small-scale entrepreneurship. However, she further notes that these represent transitory activities, quick to mushroom and quick to disappear in a volatile and fast-evolving mobile market. The key assumption is that, as soon as people can afford their own mobile phone, they ditch the expensive, inconvenient and not-exactly-private experience of making a call from the side of the street. For internet navigation the relatively expensive and unsecure mobile internet seems even less suitable for commercial sharing.

Non-commercial mobile phone sharing in Africa has been widely researched and it appears to be more common in rural than in urban areas[5, 6]. As in most things sharing, family comes first[4]. Involuntary sharing is common and takes the form of phone inspections by jealous partners or protective parents, to the extreme case of husbands acting as gatekeepers for their wives[6]. A mobile phone can be displayed and shared also as a sign of one's status. Particularly for young people from a relatively low socio-economic background, pulling out a new and expensive mobile phone is a sure way to impress friends and potential partners.

Surveys on mobile phone use in two rural areas in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa[7, 8] suggest an almost universal access to mobile phones – either one's own or someone else's – among young people. The percentage of those who use someone else's phone did not change much over the period of one year, while the frequency of both daily and weekly use increased 12% and 15% respectively. The surveys also suggest a relatively fast phone turnover, with 20% to 30% of respondents having acquired their current phone within the last year. Although this alone does not tell us much about the capability of the new phones, it is reasonable to assume that more recent phones would have better features.

Most research on mobile phone sharing focuses primarily on traditional communication activities such as making calls and sending or receiving SMS. However, people across the socio-economic spectrum are increasingly engaging in a wide range of other activities. In the two areas mentioned above, approximately 60% of the youth used a mobile phone to take pictures, listen to music or make/watch videos. This percentage increased by 20%-25% over a one-year period[7]. An additional 20% of the respondents lived in a household where at least one member had a multimedia phone[8]. Producing, sharing and consuming photos, music and videos are social activities and often entail passing around one's phone. Multimedia content copied or downloaded on one's phone can be enjoyed by a whole household or circle of friends.

Networked activities such as instant messaging, browsing the web and social networking seem to follow similar trends but, since they require more advanced phones, lag behind in terms of percentage of people doing them. In the two communities under consideration, between 30% and 50% of young people claim to instant message, social network or browse the web on a mobile phone. The mobile internet is very different from the desktop one in terms of cost and privacy concerns[9], and people in rural areas appear to be more and more savvy regarding both. The monthly average of R160 per household spent on airtime limits sharing as far as networked activities are concerned. As data becomes more affordable, people will share content rather than devices.

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An interesting strategy to save on mobile costs is "SIM jockeying", the sharing of the same phone on different networks by changing the SIM card. Although this phenomenon is noted all over Africa, relatively little research exists[10]. In South Africa, where there are more active SIM cards than mobile phone users, the mobile termination rates charged by mobile operators to connect to a different network have recently been the topic of public debate[11]. The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) implemented regulations intended to increase competition by favouring smaller operators. However, network coverage in rural areas is mainly provided by the two large mobile companies (Vodacom and MTN) who have invested heavily in infrastructure. In one of the two rural areas mentioned above, a single operator accounts for three out of four SIM cards[8]. Yet, even in a condition of quasi-monopoly, one in 10 people uses multiple SIM cards.

SIM jockeying has implications for media and other types of organisations planning to use mobile phones to reach young people in a rural area. Bulk SMS notifications may reach the same person twice. System logs of a website may consider the same mobile user connecting with two different SIM cards as two separate unique visitors. Negotiating reduced connection charges with the main mobile operator may prove difficult, considering that this does not guarantee loyalty to that network. For journalists covering stories in rural areas, having to try a series of different phone numbers to contact a source may add to all the other difficulties already related to the context.

Although it has received comparatively little attention thus far, SIM-jockeying is potentially more disruptive and longer lasting than phone sharing. For the time

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being, there are three points to consider for journalists, advertisers and media practitioners:

1. Things are changing fast. Even in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape young people are getting better and better mobile phones and doing more and more with them. Whether one sees rural communities as a relatively untapped market or an underserved portion of the population, intervention strategies need to plan for a multimedia content sharing future rather than a "please call me on my sister's phone" past.

2. It takes one phone to connect a household. There is no way of telling how far or how many people content can reach once it is copied or downloaded onto someone's phone.

3. Unique visitors might not be that unique. Whether contacting a source, sending out SMS notifications or covering a story, the assumption "one man, one phone" is no longer true (if it ever was).

Endnotes

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