Constructing Public Discourse with Ethnographic/SMS "Texts"

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Abstract. We are interested in how individuals and communities develop opinions as they design and use new mobile, public-sphere technologies. We situate our work among new considerations of ethnography, mobile technologies and rhetoric and describe the design and pilot installation of a new technology called *TexTales* designed to support mobile public discourse.

> *Mobility in the end may supply the means by which the spoils of remote and indirect interaction and independence flow back into local life, keeping it flexible, preventing the stagnancy which has attended stability in the past, and furnishing with it the elements of a variegated and many-hued experience.*
> *– John Dewey, <u>The Public and Its Problems</u>.*

1 Introduction

How do individuals construct, share and revise opinions about themselves and their communities and how can new technological tools and ethnographic techniques reflect and support these processes?

We investigate this question through longitudinal, participatory design where our goal is to learn how public discourse spheres can be created by building with people new kinds of communications tools (not just observing and analyzing current community communication). In the tradition of Constructionist design [15] and within an evolving "Citizen Journalism" framework [2], we aim to support the reflexive creation of two kinds of artifacts: technological tools for public discourse; and dynamic, "intermodal texts" created as people use the tools. We consider building these artifacts to be complementary activities. In our framework, it is equally valid for opinions to manifest themselves in technologies, in discussions during their design and in conversations during their use. Our assertion is that we can best learn how individuals develop opinions by creating new public spheres in which people construct and critique both digital and political representations.

Designing for this pluralism brings technological and analytic challenges. To address the technological challenge we focus on how newly ubiquitous mobile technolo-

gies can create public spheres that are fixed neither in time nor space. To address the analytic challenge, we propose a new kind of "participatory ethnography" in which distinctions between participant and observer are purposefully blurred, and in which those who are usually portrayed in ethnographic texts become their authors and critics. We are not designing *using* ethnography (as is usual in HCI) but are, instead, designing to help people *do* their own ethnography. This necessitates a shift not only in how we think about ethnography but also in how we think about certain kinds of discourse technologies. The nomadic communications of mobile technologies may constitute new discourse spheres in which public opinions are constructed, shared and revised across both time and space in new ways.

An extensive review of the emerging synergies among ethnography, mobile technology, HCI and rhetoric is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we can see that *ethnographers* are beginning to develop techniques that emphasize "following the people/thing/metaphor/story/biography/conflict", are reconsidering definitions of "field" and "subject" [12] and are articulating new relationships between ethnographic and digital representations [10]. *Mobile technologists* are focusing on how hybrid virtual-physical spaces support different kinds of design contexts [7], "socially translucent systems" [9] and distributed, "everyday computing" [1]. *HCI designers* are practicing new methodologies for "unpacking" tensions between public and private spaces [14], for applying ethnography to both system design and critique [8, 13] and – of specific relevance to this project – for helping physical communities establish online presences [5] and visual archives [18]. Finally, *rhetoricians* are developing new, but historically based, models of multiple, permeable public spheres [3], relating them to everyday actions [17] and new technologies [4] and asking what kinds of representations [11, 16] best support public discourse.

We situate our work at the intersection of these domains. Our goal is to create with people new exemplars that enrich these synergies and that advance the notion of dynamic, technologically-supported public spheres. Here we describe the development and initial use of one such system – *TexTales*, a large-scale, public publishing tool in which individuals create captions for community photos with SMS texts.

2   Designing *TexTales*

To investigate the notion of technologically supported public spheres, we engaged in a longitudinal, participatory design relationship with Fatima Mansions, an urban flat complex near our lab in Dublin, Ireland. We worked with them over 6 months to take photos, design interfaces and install *TexTales*. The community consists of approximately 700 residents living in 14 4-story apartment blocks built in 1951 and has undergone considerable social and economic change. Of immediate concern is an upcoming "regeneration" in which all buildings are to be demolished and replaced. The residents are focused on creating their own ways to understand and manage this change and are considering the redesign of the physical architecture but also more abstract notions of community and culture. In short, Fatima is eager to experiment with constructing new public spheres. Our principal contact in Fatima is the Fatima History Project, a group that meets weekly to discuss the community's history and,

increasingly, to debate its future. In an early meeting, the group expressed frustration with relating their current archiving projects (primarily newsletters and public photo exhibits) to the community at large. This dissatisfaction, combined with our goal of researching-by-building new interactive public spheres, served as a starting point for creating *TexTales*, a new kind of contemporary, discursive archive.

We first distributed 50 disposable cameras among the residents, asking them questions like "show me something in your community you love", "show me something you hate" and "show me something you'd like someone standing here 100 years from now to see"[1]. With these loose guidelines (very few people answered the questions explicitly), residents began to gather pictures for the new archive. They took over 700 photos and our challenge became finding ways to use these images to spark dialogue within and about Fatima. Over the course of several weeks, approximately 10 women from the Fatima History Project surveyed all images, selecting and arranging 90 photos for the first *TexTales* installation. Concurrently, at Media Lab Europe, we developed a technical architecture for large-scale public display and annotation of digital images. This necessitated selecting a display mechanism (public projection) and supporting a commonly used ubiquitous technology (mobile phones)[2].

TexTales has 3 components: custom software interfacing with a Nokia Card Phone to receive and parse standard SMS text messages; a custom tcl/HTML script to create the image-text combinations; and a web server to display the interface. Users contribute a photo caption by sending a text in the form `<picture number> <caption>` to the system (*e.g.* `4 who's that?`) and, approximately 20 seconds later, the caption appears anonymously under the image. Earlier captions appear progressively smaller and all captions are stored in log files. In designing this interface, we were inspired by the provocative public projection installations Krystof Wodiczko embeds in social and architectural spaces [19] as well as the City of Leeds's *CityPoems* project [6].

3   Pilot Installation

In preparation for a larger launch, we recently conducted a pilot installation of *TexTales* in one of Fatima's public squares. The installation began at approximately 9pm and lasted for about an hour. Approximately 40 people of various ages (the youngest participant was 8 years old) participated and observed, creating 20 SMS text captions for 3 different sets of images (27 images in total).

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[1] Thanks to Frank O'Connor, Jeff Cooper and Loyalist College Canada's photojournalism editing class for initiating this process and asking these questions. Thanks to Kodak Canada for donating the cameras.

[2] An informal survey confirmed that most Fatima residents have mobile phones and that SMS texting is a common way of communicating.

Fig. 1. Clockwise from top left: women of the Fatima History Project editing more than 700 images taken by residents and selecting sets of 9 images for use with *TexTales*; one of 12 interfaces prepared by the women and used by residents; residents with *TexTales*. (For technical reasons, we projected onto the ground; subsequent installations are designed for the community center's wall)

4   Discussion and Conclusions

Several compromises and decisions emerged during the design and process and pilot and, while still early, some helpful observations were made.

First, we decided that there would be no filtering of texts sent to the system. Although this risks displaying "inappropriate" texts, we decided that text filters are imperfect, easily subverted and do not reflect the language often used in casual conversation. The participants commented that, since the system only displays the latest 3 texts for each image, offensive texts could quickly be deleted from the display (but not the log file) by sending further texts to the picture. Also although texts were displayed anonymously, the crowd immediately asked who sent all texts, each caption demanding attribution and inviting conversation. Although authors remain anonymous in the digital archive, during the installation, their captions were starting points for public discourse. Thus, the "censorship" and anonymity that existed in the *TexTales* pilot installation did not involve blocking content or tracking users but was instead distributed more subtlety among social, design and technological considerations. *TexTales* also attracted interest among a range of residents, with many young children, young adults and older people observing and participating. The system seemed to support people easily transitioning between being participants and observers, supporting simultaneous contributions from multiple sources and leaving most regulation of the interaction to the social space surrounding the interface.

TexTales seems to support a new kind of public sphere: it attracts diverse interest, supporting people as both participants and observers; participation is through mobile technology that is accessible, appropriate and socially situated; and, *TexTales* results in public and publicly-constructed ethnographic "texts" that are available for further analysis. These observations suggest that ubiquitous mobile technologies offer a new

opportunity to create dynamic discourse spaces in which people and groups can experiment with creating, sharing and revising personal and public opinions.

Acknowledgements

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