

Mobile telephony is one of the most explosive developments ever to have taken place in the telecommunications industry. Not only has it changed the nature and function of social communication through speech and text, but it is on the very edge of potentially bringing about a revolution in visual communication as well. According to statistics from April, 2006 there were 2 billion mobile phone subscribers worldwide, 30 million of them with access to 3G networks¹ (mobile networks that have broadband capabilities able to support greater numbers of voice and data customers and which have higher data rates at lower incremental cost than 2G networks). Of these two billion subscribers worldwide, 850 million have camera phones², a number that, along with global subscription, is expected to rise significantly, projected by Lyra Research to reach 1.5 billion by 2010³. But the number already exceeds those with access to digital cameras worldwide and exceeds the 180 million who own personal computers. This pervasive phenomenon is not exclusively linked to more developed nations. A rush to develop 3G infrastructures is considerably prevalent in developing nations in Africa, for instance, a continent that already has 83 million mobile phone users. In addition, in conjunction with changes in infrastructure, mobile phones themselves are only becoming more and more advanced, with Samsung unveiling its new 10 megapixel camera phone at CeBit 2006 in March of this year and more affordable especially for developing nations.

The effect of this phenomenon on an already increasingly networked world has the potential to be incredibly extensive. In his essay, *Political Texting: SMS and Elections*, Howard Rheingold, author of the book *Smart Mobs*, makes the point that the social use of mobile technology has the power to change cultural civilization. He states, *"The use of SMS for political action is only in its infancy, but has already enabled citizens to topple governments and tip elections from Manila to Madrid. The electoral power of texting could be an early indicator of future social upheaval: whenever people gain the power to organize collective action on new scales,*

¹ <http://www.cellular.co.za/stats/stats-main.htm>

² http://www.cameraphonereport.com/statistics_camera_phones/index.html

³ <http://www.prweb.com/releases/cameraphone/forecast/prweb420747.htm>

in new places, at new tempos, with groups they had not been able to organize before, societies and civilizations change.” Although he is talking about the use of SMS technology, this article was written in 2004. Given the change in mobile technology in the last two years, it would not at all be a stretch to apply his statements to the current and future possibility of the use of MMS messaging, the sending of multi-media messages. It has already been acknowledged throughout history the profound effect that photography and film/video can exert over the ways in which populations interpret cultural, political and social events. However, most forms of popular visual media have, throughout their history, maintained a certain aspect of artifice. Even, photography, long thought to be an accurate representation of time and space was affected by man made intentions from the beginning. Different approaches to developing negatives, different chemical usage, different techniques in printing pictures, cropping, double exposure and even staging the photograph itself were common forms of obscuring the ‘actual’ appearance of ‘reality’ long before the widespread use of digital tools such as Photoshop. The unique aspect of media captured and immediately posted with the mobile phone is that it maintains a level of unfiltered and unedited authenticity that is quite different then what this medium has seen before.

But more then the ability to present an unfiltered image is the ability of the mobile phone to function ubiquitously within communities of people who had previously been unable, because of lack of access and steep learning curves, to participate in the production of original content, especially within an online structure. As these communities, who have either already been or are soon to be exposed to mobile phones, obtain devices with increasingly sophisticated technology, they have new and unique abilities to document things of individual importance and share them instantaneously with each other and with larger audiences both locally and globally. As the infrastructure becomes more capable, large portions of people, previously voice-less both in the online conversation and mobile sphere will now have the capability to transmit media information to the network, without having to have access to personal computers, image or video editing software or uploading tools. Many of the larger online social aggregators of

media content have already enabled mobile posting platforms. Flickr, an online photo sharing site, has had this functionality for over a year, and YouTube, the astronomically popular video sharing site, just released functionality in May of this year.

Unfortunately, while this kind of immediate transmission of media information has the potential to be an unbelievably valuable tool; it also has incredibly negative connotations. Because of their size, ubiquity and tendency to blend into the daily landscape, there is always the argument that the potential for misuse, surveillance and the violation of privacy in user generated content will become more extensive. A similar argument states that most people will use the mobile phone to take pictures of their friends or video for entertainment purposes, rather than using it in other ways, and that these uses will over shadow any pertinent capabilities of the phone to communicate other kinds of valuable media information. There is also the argument that any information that is posted will become lost in the current flood of content and virtually unsearchable by those who may be interested in it. To a certain extent, this kind of usage has already been proven to be the case if one looks at the kind of content that early users of this technology are contributing. I would argue, however, that this has more to do with the architecture of media sharing websites, the current demographic of the camera phone user and the fact that we are just beginning to understand that there maybe a significant difference between mobile phone media and other forms of content created with more traditional digital tools.

In his book, *The Digital Person*, Daniel Solove discusses the metaphor of the term architecture as it relates to computer code. He states that just as physical structures by their design have different effects on our behavior, attitudes, norms, social interaction, sense of freedom and security, so do the design of information systems. The structures of many of the sites that have enabled mobile posting, like YouTube, are, unfortunately, more akin to models of traditional broadcast media and Hollywood, with an emphasis on self-promotion and celebrity. Many of these sites emphasize content that has the 'most views' or is the 'most popular' and contain search tools that are virtually crippled within

the massive repository of data. Thus, users are more apt to find, view and interact via comments with media content that has a kind of entertainment value. In her essay, "Writing Friendship into Being, Group Formation on Myspace", PhD student Danah Boyd, specifies that users learn the cultural norms of a particular website by taking cues from their friends or people on the site whose identities most reflect their own. Although she was obviously writing in the context of social networking sites, this particular view is very relevant when looking at media sharing sites as well. If we are to take her point, it would seem logical that after being initiated into communities, like YouTube for instance, many users would be more likely to ascribe to the ideal of marketability and upload content that falls within the accepted realms of the overall site architecture. This is not to say that interesting or relevant content is not available on spaces like YouTube, it absolutely is. Or that content that attempts to entertain viewers is not of value, because that's not necessarily true. But without designating some kind of structure for smaller groups to develop a real sense of community sharing that could provoke different kinds of interactive discussion, YouTube and sites like it succeed in becoming a vast database of television channels rather than a functional platform encouraging media sharing communities.

The relevance of this discussion of information structure to the development and dissemination of mobile media is two-fold. In order for a tool of communication to be used in interesting ways in a networked environment, there has to be a place for the communication to begin. Many of these remote posting platforms have the discussion of functionality so buried in their data structure that even understanding how to execute the process is often lost on those with limited technical knowledge. In addition, they fail to place a distinct difference between media uploaded from mobile phones, allowing it to live within the structure formulated for other forms of content. This not only diminishes the capacity of the media to relay a different kind of message, but places restriction on the possibility of communication outside of one's immediate circle of relationships in the real world. The capability of mobile phones to capture phenomenal media content is only going to grow, and the potential participation of user's previously offline is enormous.

It is with these ideas in mind that freeFormed.org was conceived. freeFormed strives to incorporate at its core the idea of letting the concept of a social network define conversations surrounding media. Using freeFormed's unique definition of a circle, individuals can create communal spaces intended to function as posting portals. Within this adaptation, users can speak to each other using media itself, comment on media uploaded by other members or begin a traditional dialogue with text. Most importantly, freeFormed is designed around posting media remotely, to encourage the immediate publishing of content in the spirit of grassroots journalism. This design will enable a streamlined method of sharing information that, while available to the public, is focused on relevance to specific communities rather than trying to cater to mass audiences.

freeFormed was also built around the idea of distinguishing between relationships that are created within the platform. Upon establishing contacts on freeFormed, a user can place each individual relationship in context by putting each person in specific user-generated groups. Further contextualizing the freeFormed experience, a freeFormed circle can be created with varying degrees of privacy. A circle can be completely public and thus visible by anyone online and open for any user to join, completely private and invisible to the online community with an 'invitation only' policy, or semi-private allowing members of freeFormed to view the circle's media and discussion but needing an invitation in order to join. This allows users to have different levels of communication and provides privacy protection for those who would prefer not to have their content or conversations exist in a public sphere. FreeFormed is also investigating the option of anonymous posting to further protect users who may be publishing sensitive information, specifically concerning crimes or human rights violations in countries where governmental interference in free speech may place the poster in serious personal danger for sharing certain content.

The current development of a mobile phone application that allows users to post media directly to their profile or circles with greater ease and without the added cost of sending an MMS message conveys some of the unique aspects of freeFormed that set it apart from other networking sites. The application will allow users to specify the title, description, circle and privacy of each media post. The application also allows for the deletion of media from the mobile device once it is sent, looking forward to possible repercussions in activist situations as well as to prevent regular users from clogging up their phone with data once it is posted elsewhere. The application also allows most users' phones to send greater video length than many phone plans will allow. By integrating a mobile device external to the main site, freeFormed is expanding functionality by allowing users to receive phone and email alerts. These alerts will notify users of new comments on their media, new posts to specific forums they are subscribed to and/or bulletins sent out by circle members about events or news of interest. RSS will also be incorporated so that users can subscribe to the circles and be notified online if new material is posted.

freeFormed has also recently developed a voice message component to the site's functionality, the effect of which is twofold. First, many users, especially in developing countries, may not have access to media enabled phones. By allowing people to leave voice messages for specific circles or on specific media files, freeFormed hopes to bridge this technological gap. In addition, for those users who do have media enabled phones, this new bundle of functionality, collectively identified as the 'blast network' on the site, will allow an individual to transmit information instantaneously directly to the mobile phones of specific groups of their contacts. These contacts will then be able to view this media and call in to place personal or public comments, all without ever having to access the actual freeFormed site from a computer. freeFormed also hopes to couple this functionality with mobile browsing capability in the future, so that a user will be able to view the entire site directly from their phone with ease.

Overall we hope that freeFormed.org will become a platform for virtual communities that will develop positive online communal identities and promote discussion through multimedia that break down geographical and language barriers in ways that social networking and media posting sites thus far have been unable to attain. freeformed.org is an ongoing project. We wish to thank you for your time in reviewing our research and look forward to discussing and attaining feedback from our KAIST colleagues.

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