



Prospects for Mobile Media, 2007

an ethnography of mobile media
use and disuse in Vancouver

Jean Hébert and Richard Smith, SFU, 2007



Imbrications of physical and virtual: how North Americans configure their “third space”

we undertook research in the summer and autumn of 2007, looking closely at how and why North American urban mobile device users capture, share, and consume mobile rich media.

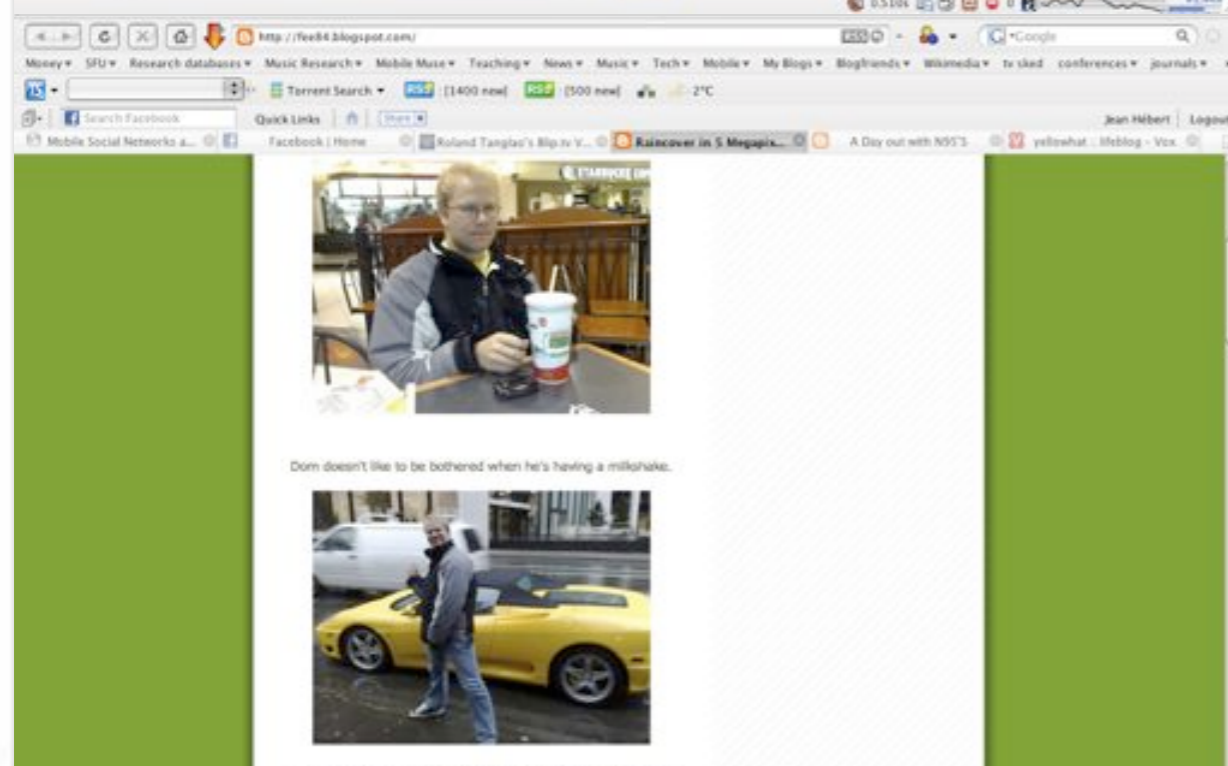
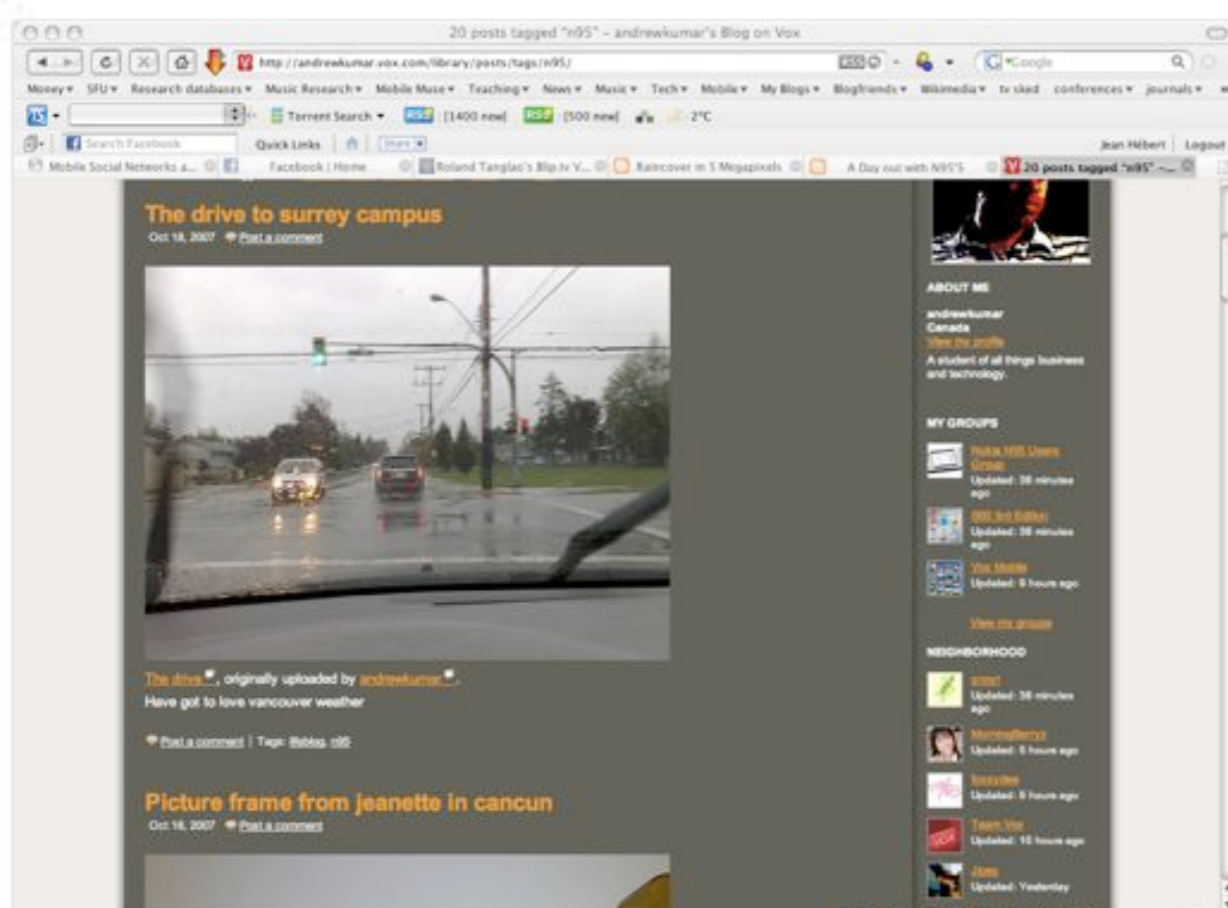
We envision (following Ito, Rheingold, and others) the mobile media space as a “third space” of copresent media creation – ideally enhancing and supporting interactions in physical, public spaces – in contrast to tethered rich media (PCs, web browsers, social networking sites), which contribute to (for better or worse) an “asynchronous culture”

The compulsion of capture

why we capture the things we do



this study poses questions about “why we capture” and “why we share” to a group that is teetering on the brink of mobile adoption



The Seduction of sharing: where, how, and why we share

we discuss the implications of asynchronous culture on media capture practices and sharing practices

we also discuss the various barriers to user immersion in synchronous media experiences in North America and suggest directions for future research.

Research Methodology

- emphasis on organic groups of friends
- subject-driven ethnographic data collection: blogs, photo, Facebook, tagging
- frequent discussion groups and videography of subject's daily lives
- Two phases: "taste test" and participant observation
 - "*taste test*": participants given N95s for one week with (variably) specified instructions on what to do
 - *participant observation*: participants accompanied by researchers on outings, weekly interviews, bi-weekly discussion groups - 6 weeks of "immersion"

Taste test phase - methodology

Week 1: no software, no task	Week 2: no software, specific task
Week 3: software, no task	Week 4: software and specific task

for groups given software, we used Widsets, Jaiku, and Shozu

other groups were given the default Nokia N95 settings

each group (self-selecting groups of five friends) was either specifically told to “attend an event together and photoblog about it” or was not given this instruction at all.

Participant observation methodology

- open structure
- longer duration
- most data (media) collection is crowdsourced
- transparency of research questions and methods
- blurring of researcher and researched



a group of four “mobile power users” was recruited (all of whom know each other) and photoblogged their experiences over a six week period.

photos and videos created and shared by the group were tagged using lifeworld categories derived from TEDA (Onufrijchuk, 2004) and analyzed in these terms.

there are obvious gaps in the lifeworld represented by this “asynchronous” representation of these users’ mobile lives – note that “family”, “relaxation” and “conviviality” are underrepresented in the data (as shown in relative size of tags, which represents the frequency with which images were tagged with each category)

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What changes when your media goes mobile?

Roland explains here how his aesthetic practice is altered (at least temporarily) because of limitations in the N95 (time lag on the camera). Roland has adopted a slash n burn photography style echoed by the style of capture of this clip – videotaping a moving target while on a moving bicycle.

Mobile media use and sharing is just like that. While conventional SNS, blogging and photoblogging are like sitting in a room having a conversation around a photo album, perhaps with a camera on hand, mobile media is more like videotaping a moving target while on a moving bicycle, and making the proceeds instantly available.

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Major Findings

given specific instructions, users made more creative use of their mobile devices: both groups instructed to "attend something together, capture, and share media from the event" did several things:

- (1) created multiple fictional narratives on a few separate blogs based on the photos taken
- (2) staged a self-consciously artificial "sleepover" for the benefit of the study - again, an attempt to create a fictional narrative out of captured media

in contrast, users not told what to do

- (3) approached their week with the phones as an exercise in creating something useful, though convenient (given busy schedules) (photoblogging their commutes), or
- (4) didn't carry out any structured group activity - simply going about their week and posting photos to a group - again, photoblogging their commute, mainly, but unsystematically so.

no users adopted the widget software installed on phones. in all but one group, users actively and quickly modified their phones (though the level of technical competence in doing so was unevenly distributed across and within groups) - ranged from ringtone transfer to software installation.

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- users actively choose whether this is personally controlled (blogging) or socially distributed (friends comments and tags relied upon to provide context)
- users actively and immediately personalise new devices whatever their level of technical familiarity with mobile devices (whether ringtones, skins or apps)

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 - technical (configuring shozu, time lag on cameraphones)
 - aesthetic/cultural barriers - conventions around rich media use (IP, expectations about surveillance and privacy)
 - financial barriers

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1. *break the habituation.* make a specific task - immersion in synchronous media use/sharing

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2. *comparative survey research*. how is mobile media sharing done differently in different cultural contexts (Vancouver and Beijing)

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