

https://dspace.org/

MXit it Up in the Media: Media Discourse Analysis on a Mobile Instant Messaging System

Chigona, Agnes; Chigona, Wallace

2008-12-15

LINK Centre, University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Johannesburg

http://hdl.handle.net/10539/19778

Chigona. A., & Chigona, W. (2008). MXit it up in the media: Media discourse analysis on a mobile instant messaging system. The Southern African Journal of Information and Communication (SAJIC), 9, 42-57. https://doi.org/10.23962/10539/19778

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

MXIT IT UP IN THE MEDIA: MEDIA DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON A MOBILE INSTANT MESSAGING SYSTEM

Agnes Chigona and Wallace Chigona
The Department of Information Systems, University of Cape Town

ABSTRACT: Mobile instant messaging has the potential of providing the youth not only with a social space where they can interact and bond but also with a learning environment. MXit is the most popular mobile instant messaging application in South Africa. Due to its nascency, little academic research has been done on the application. The application has drawn considerable local media interest; however, most of the media coverage has been negative. Media discourse of the application is of academic interest, since media discourse is one of the many ways through which reality is constructed. This means there is a relationship between media discourse and public opinion. Distortions in the media may misinform and engender impaired decision making amongst policymakers as well as members of the public. Discourse analysis can reveal distortions in media communication and counter misinformation. Using critical discourse analysis, we have analysed the media discourse on MXit by employing the Habermasian concept of the *ideal speech situation* and its validity claims as a conceptual tool. The analysis shows that (i) the media discourse is fraught with distortions; (ii) the media have mainly used the voice of adults to legitimise the discourse and the voices of the youth who are the main users of the application are missing; and (iii) there seems to be a moral panic developing around the use of MXit.
KEYWORDS: Media discourse, Validity claims, Habermas, Mobile instant messaging and MXit.

Introduction

For most people in developing countries mobile data is the only access they have to electronic data. This is mainly due to the lack of infrastructure to support traditional access and also due to the wide adoption of cellular telephony (Chigona, Kankwenda and Manjoo, 2008). For instance, in South Africa there are only 10.1 fixed telephone lines for every 100 people, (Internet World Statistics, 2008); in contrast, the mobile phone network covers 96% of the country, (Bridges.org, 2006); the country has over 35.9 million mobile phones, (The eBusiness Handbook, 2006) for a population of 45 million. As Duarando, Parker and de la Harpe (2007) state, one of the mobile Internet applications popular among the youth is mobile instant messaging (MIM). Due to its popularity, MIMs can be used effectively as a communication tool to and among the youth. As Hwang and Lombard (2006) noted, the youth use MIM for functional as well as for hedonic purposes. For instance, Butgreit (2007) demonstrated that MIMs can be used for tutoring mathematics to students.

The most popular MIM in South Africa is MXit. The adoption rate of MXit has been phenomenal. Launched in May 2006, by mid-2007 the application had over four million subscribers, (Duarando, Parker and de la Harpe, 2007) and the user base was expanding at the rate of between 9 000 and 12 000 per day (Francke & Weideman, 2007). Despite its popularity and its potential impact, there has been little academic research on the use and impact of the application. There are therefore still a number of unanswered questions about the application. For example, for what are the youth using the technology? What are the social implications of the technology? Answers to these questions are critical to various stakeholders such as the youth (the main users of the application), their parents, educators, law enforcers, mobile software developers as well as the business community who may want to use the application for reaching customers.

While there is a dearth of academic literature on the phenomenon, there has been substantial media interest in MXit, its use and impact. However, most of the media coverage has been negative. Media coverage of the application is of academic interest because media are not only purveyors of information but are also significant in shaping public opinion. Media are believed to be successful in influencing their audience/readers what to think about (Cohen, (1963). In most cases, media discourse is one of the important ways through which reality is socially shaped (Cukier, Ngwenyama, Bauer, and Middleton, 2008; Fairclough, 1995; Jensen and Jankowsk, 1991; Inglis 1990; Wodak, 1989). Media discourse, therefore, can affect the adoption, use and impact of an Information Technology (IT) artefact. Since there is a relationship between media discourse and public opinion, there is a need for distortions in media communication to be revealed. In this paper we critically analyse media discourse on MXit in an effort to explore ways in which the language used in text messages may shape the decisionmaking of stakeholders.

Acknowledging the significance of media discourse as one way in which reality about MXit is socially constructed, we posed the following research questions:

- What is the nature of media discourse on MXit?
- What is the nature of communication distortions, if any, contained in the media about MXit?
- What would be the basis for the distortions?
- What are the probable impacts of the distortion on decisionmaking regarding MXit by various stakeholders?

To answer these questions we employed the Habermasian concept of the Ideal Speech Situation and its Validity Claims of truth, sincerity, comprehensibility and legitimacy (Habermas, 1984). Each validity claim was applied as an analytical lens through which the texts about MXit were analysed. We developed a list of questions to facilitate identification of truth, sincerity, comprehensibility and legitimacy in the texts. The questions were also used as basis of a coding scheme for identifying components of ideal speech in the texts.

The critical approach was deemed appropriate for this research as it questions the current situation. According to Stahl (2004a), a critical analysis means that the validity of the statements made during communications are more than questioned; mistakes or weaknesses in theories or their consequences are actively sought out. The approach provided insights and ethical standard for the analysis in order to identify the distortions that may influence the thinking of MXit stakeholders.

The media discourses on MXit analysed in this paper were drawn from a sample of South African newspaper articles for the period 2006 to April 2008 (the time of the analysis). At the outset, it should be mentioned that it was not the intention of this paper to discuss the merits or demerits of the application.

A brief description of MXit

Similar to other MIMs, MXit is a synchronous communication tool that works for mobile devices such as PDAs and cellphones. Unlike SMS, MIM uses Internet protocol to exchange messages. MIMs function in a way similar to computer-based instant messages (eg Messenger and ICQ). Unlike some MIMs on the South African market, MXit is network-independent ie it can operate between interactants on any network provider and the interactants do not have to be on the same network. In contrast, some MIMs (such as noknok and meep) may be used only by

interactants on the same network. Some South African youth also use other international MIMs eg mig33 and Fling (Chigona *et al* 2008).

MXit users can chat either in chatrooms or on a one to one basis with contacts who have been added to one's contact list; there is virtually no limit to the number of contacts one may have. Contacts are added at the discretion of the users. To add a person to the contact list the initiator sends an invitation and the other party must accept the invitation. To participate in a chatroom, one needs to subscribe to the chatroom and there is a fee involved. Chatrooms are often centred on a theme (eg teens) or around a geographical location (eg Cape Town). Users in chatrooms often use pseudonyms and the phone numbers of the guests are not displayed. A recently added mode of chatting on MXit is known as multiMix. In Multimix a user may invite friends to chat together; the friends do not necessarily have to be on each others' contact list.

One of the factors that has been attributed to the fast growth of MXit is the cost. Unlike sending SMSs, MXit is charged based on the data which is transferred. A MXit message may cost the sender around two South African cents compared to 70 South African cents for an SMS message.

Due to its nascency, research specifically on MXit is limited. Our search of academic literature found only five research papers. In a study focusing on uses and gratification of mobile Internet amongst South African university students, Chigona *et al* (2008) noted that chatting was the main motivation for using Mobile Internet amongst the students; and that MXit was the main application used for chatting. From a sample of school-going youth, Francke and Weideman (2007) found that the users of the application are generally young and that there is no significant difference in usage across gender. Dourando *et al* (2007) noted that MXit can be used as a communication channel between teachers and learners. Butgreit (2007) demonstrated that the application can be used for teaching mathematics to youngsters. Bosch (2008) analysed the use of MXit by adolescent girls in Cape Town.

Theoretical Framework

Since the framework for the study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it is necessary to understand what the term "discourse" means. The term discourse refers to "institutionalised language codes to articulate the social construction of reality and events" (Cukier and Thomlinson, 2005: 89). The way an issue is discussed can shape or limit people's understanding by reinforcing assumptions they had previously taken for granted. Discourse analysis attempts to explore some of the various ways in which the use of language structures assumption.

An approach to the study of discourse, which views "language as a form of social practice", (Fairclough 1989: 20) and is concerned with the ways social and political domination is reproduced by text and/or speech is known as (CDA). There are a number of CDA philosophies. Two common examples that have been used in the field of Information Systems are Faucoldian (based on Faucault) and Habermasian (named after Juergen Habermas). This study is based on a Habermasian model which is discussed more fully later.

Due to the rigour involved in analysing text using CDA, most CDA techniques work on a limited set of documents. As such, CDA has been typically applied where the corpus is small, such as policy documents, eg Thompson, (2004) and where there are a limited number of speeches, eg Roode, Speight, Pollock, and Webber, (2004). The question then is, how can one apply CDA on a large corpus? A pragmatic approach is to select a small corpus of text. For example, in analysing the South African government's view on ICT for development, Roode

et al (2007) selected three speeches from a large pool of government officials' speeches. Such approaches have been criticised by Stahl (2004b) and Cukier *et al* (2008) as having the potential of being selective; how does one prove that the researcher did not intentionally select documents to prove a point (Stahl, 2004b; Cukier *et al* 2008)? They propose a CDA technique which addresses this problem by combining content analysis and hermeneutics approaches to critically analyse a large corpus. Since this research dealt with media discourse spanning a period of two years, with a large number of media reports on the application, we opted for that approach. The approach is based on Theory of Communicative Action (TCA); the background to TCA will be provided before describing how it is operationalised.

Background to Theory of Communicative Action

TCA is one of the important works by Habermas. Habermas' discourse approach provides an explicit and unique insight for understanding communication distortion and for improving practice (Forester, 1983). TCA allows for: (a) interpretive analysis of meaning; (b) empirical analysis of communicative interaction and structural settings; and (c) normative analysis of systematic distortion and violation of free discourse of humans implicit in the most ordinary communications (Forester, 1983: 236). In other words, TCA defines how humans can interact in an ethical way, (Stahl, 2004b).

TCA has its foundations in a "three-world concept": the *objective* world, the individual's *subjective* world and the *social* world (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson, 1999). The objective world consists of the universal truth, the subjective world encapsulates the internal beliefs of a person while the social world states what actions are desirable, ie the normative truth. The three worlds help to explain what lies at the heart of Habermasian discourse analysis, namely the four validity claims: truth, rightness/legitimacy, authenticity and clarity/comprehensibility (Stahl, 2004b). The four validity claims should hold for the "ideal speech situation" to exist. If the speaker and the listener do not agree on the validity of some of the claims made, then a statement is considered contentious. In that case, the actors should "seek to reach an understanding about their situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement" (Habermas, 1984 cited by O'Donnell, 1999).

The four validity claims are grouped into two: communication competence and linguistic competence. Comprehensibility is a linguistic competence rule since it deals with the clarity of the utterances from both a semantic and a syntax point of view. The remaining three validity claims are communication competence, since they deal with the content of the communication (Habermas, 1984). *Comprehensibility* refers to clarity of the communication ie a statement is clear/comprehensible if the syntax and the semantics of the communication do not confuse the listener (Stahl *et al* 2005). Empirically comprehensibility can be tested by checking for omission.

A speaker is said to be telling the *truth* if their utterances are part of "the totality of what is the case" ie it would hold in the objective world (Cecez-Kecmanovic and Janson 1999). The truth claims check for falsehood, deliberate omissions of information – especially if it is opposing the views being promoted by the speaker (Van Djijk, 2006). Validating the truth requires not only understanding the context in which the information is presented, but also analysing the entire corpus of text, (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997), ie one cannot claim

incompleteness or bias of discourse from one news article. Analysing the whole corpus may also help one understand individual articles (ie hermeneutic cycle).

An utterance is *legitimate* if it conforms to socially accepted rules – it would hold in the social world. According to Habermas, "a precondition to undistorted communication is that all arguments must have an equal chance to be heard" (Cukier *et al* 2008: 7). Therefore, one can test the legitimacy claim by checking whether some voices have been privileged while some have been silenced.

The use of expert voices also plays a role. For instance, it is interesting to note who is considered an expert and why are they considered experts. In a study on discourse on ICT for development, Chigona, Mjali, and Denz (2007) noted that politicians legitimised their opinions by referencing other politicians who are higher in the political hierarchy. Vosloo (2008) noted that at times developing countries legitimise their policies by referring to similar examples from developed countries. Using expert voices for legitimisation is often meant to silence the opposing voices. Other legitimisation techniques used include appeal to emotion (Leţcu-Fairclough, 2007). By bringing into debate things that are close to the listener's heart, such as patriotism and family, may block the listener from engaging in the debate with a sober mind.

A speaker is being *sincere* and truthful if the utterance is authentic. Sincerity claims test the motive behind an utterance. For instance, a father watching television may get rid of a child wanting his attention by sending the child to fetch him a glass of water. The request for the glass of water in this example lacks sincerity because the motive behind the statement has not been communicated to the listener. It is important to note that sincerity (truthfulness) is different from truth. An utterance can be true but not necessarily sincere. For instance, the father in the example may have been indeed thirsty and he may have indeed drunk the water and therefore the statement may pass for true, however, the utterance still lacked sincerity.

Since it is uttered in the subjective world, a sincerity claim is difficult to test and can only be inferred (Cukier *et al* 2008). As Cukier *et al* (2008) state, sincerity can be assessed by whether the facts (real and assumed) are consistent with what is contained in the discourse. Sincerity of a speaker can also be assessed by looking at stylistic choices since they (the stylistic choices) may signal the unsaid speaker's opinion of the subjects (Van Dijk, 1991 as cited by Cukier *et al* 2008). Use of jargon, emotive words, and metaphors may influence the nature of the discourse. Use of technical words may also serve to influence the opinion of the listener; technical terms are meant to convey a message that the idea being promoted is valuable (Michalos, 1986 as cited by Cukier *et al* 2008).

Table 1 summarises the validity claims. It should be emphasised that in some instances one utterance can violate more than one validity claim.

Table 1: Summary of validity claims

Competence	World	Claim	Explanation
Linguistic		Comprehensibility	Utterance should be clear in terms of syntax and semantics.
Communication	Objective	Truth	Utterance should match what the case is in reality.
	Subjective	Sincerity	Checks the intentions of the speaker. Cannot be observed, can only be inferred.
	Social	Legitimisation	Utterance should be in accordance with socially accepted norms.

Operationlising TCA

Habermas does not provide an explicit way in which TCA should be conducted. Cukier *et al* (2004) as well as Stahl *et al* (2004) propose a way in which the theory can be operationalised on a large corpus. At the heart of the approach is a set of guiding questions which are used to probe the corpus. Our adaptation of the questions proposed by Stahl *et al* (2005) is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Guiding questions used in the analysis of the texts on MXit.
A concept borrowed from Stahl *et al* (2005).

Truth: Argumentation and evidence
T1. What is said about MXit?
T2. Are the issues and options clearly defined?
T3. What costs and benefits have been identified and assessed?
T4. What evidence has been provided to support these arguments?
T5. Has the relevant information been communicated without distortion or omission?
T6. Are there ideological claims which are unexamined?
Legitimacy: Whose Interests?
L1. Who is speaking, who is silent, and what are their interests?
L2. What is privileged? What is not said about MXit?
L3. What is assumed or implied?
L4. What is missing or suppressed in the discourse?
L5. How are the decisions legitimised?
L6. Who is involved? Who is not involved?
L7. What are the stakes and interests involved or excluded?
Sincerity: Metaphors and Descriptors
S1. Do metaphors and connotative words promote or suppress understanding?
S2. Do metaphors and connotative words create false assurances?
Comprehensibility/Clarity
C1. Is there use of jargon?
C2. Are there terms that are not explained?
C3. Is there evidence of obfuscation?

This approach has also been employed by other researchers in the Information Systems domain. For example, Cukier, Middleton and Bauer (2003) have used the approach to investigate the discourses related to e-learning in Canada. Stahl *et al* (2005) used the approach to study the ICT policy in Egypt, Chigona *et al* (2007) used the approach to analyse the South African government speeches, Vosloo (2008) used the approach to study the Western Cape (South Africa) provincial government ICT strategy.

Methodology

sampling

The corpus of media text was drawn from a broad selection of newspaper articles about MXit in the timespan ranging from 2006 to 2008 (the time of the analysis). Newspapers were preferred to purely Internet-based media like blogs because newspapers reach masses in South Africa; in contrast, only few citizens have access to the Internet, (Chigona *et al* 2008). The articles were obtained by searching for the search term "MXit" from the websites of the following newspapers: *Sunday Times* (www.thetimes.co.za), and *Mail and Guardian* (www.mg.co.za). We also searched from the IOL portal (www.iol.co.za); the IOL portal provides access to 14 national and regional newspapers. We used the Internet for easy searching; however, we restricted ourselves to articles that had been published in hard copy. Again due to our language limitations we restricted ourselves to English articles (articles in other South African languages were excluded). Table 3 presents details of the newspapers and number of the articles used in this study. The details of the articles are presented in the Appendix. For coding purposes, the articles are referred as NA1 through NA24.

Table 3: Sources of articles used in this study

Name of newspaper	Number of articles
The Star	2
Pretoria News	2
Sunday Times	4
Cape Argus	5
Mail and Guardian	6
Sunday Tribune	1
Daily News	2
Weekend Post	1
The Mercury	1
Total	24

Data analysis

Analysis was conducted on the individual newspaper articles as well as the aggregate compilation of articles. The aim of the analysis was to identify empirical observations pertaining to the validity claims. After identification, the validity claims were grouped into recurring themes, which in turn were broken down into more specific claims. Various claims were recorded and analysed to see how well the communication addressed the various validity claims.

Table 4 presents the various communication claims about MXit from newspaper articles.

Table 4: Claims and the source in which they appear

Claim	Sub-claim	Specific instance	Source
Comprehensibility	Unexplained claims	GPRS; java	NA9
		Chat room	NA19;NA20; NA3
Truth	Benefit	Cost	NA4
		Enables people to make friends	NA7
		Number of users is growing everyday	NA9, NA21
	Disadvantages	Destroying relationships	NA18; NA3
		MXit chatrooms are inundated with men making lewd suggestions	NA3
	Unsupported claims	Addictive	NA13; NA7
Sincerity	Metaphors	Drug	NA22
		Evil	NA13
	Connotative language	Major evil of the 21st century	NA13
		Starting-point for a lot of problems	NA11
Legitimacy	Appeal to emotion	Use of experts	NA9; NA13 NA22

Comprehensibility

The analysis shows that articles are generally clear. However, we noted examples of technical terms used to make the argument stronger, significant or valuable. Technical terms are rarely explained. For instance, in NA9 there is the following information:

> *MXit is a mobile instant messaging application developed in South Africa that runs on GPRS/3G mobile phones with java support.*

The terms *GPRS/3G* and *java* used in the quotation are not explained and the importance of providing the technical specification remains unclear. There are also emotive terms like "addictive/addiction" which have been used extensively throughout the corpus. However, only one article (NA3) explained what that means.

Also mentioned but not adequately explained are different ways of communicating using MXit; either in chat rooms or one on one (ie chatting with known contacts). NA19 mentions that "MXit … allows for real-time chatting in one-to-one conversation or inside chat rooms". Text analysis also shows that there are different types of chat rooms. For instance, NA3 talks about a "Port Elizabeth chat room" and NA20 talks about a "Lesbian chat room". However, the differences between the various application usages are not explained clearly. In addition, the corpus does not explain how chat rooms are formed and how they are run. The understanding of the different uses could have an impact on people's opinions of the application. For instance, it was noted that most of the criticisms regarding the application are with respect to the chat room functions and not attributable to the one-on-one chatting. This may signal a lack of understanding of the other application uses which may be less controversial.

Truth claims

Truth claims are assessed by looking at argumentation and evidence in texts. Assessing any application like MXit requires an examination of costs and/or benefits in the discourse. It is noted that the media emphasised the cost of sending a message as opposed to the cost of acquiring a phone that is capable of supporting the application. According to the corpus, one of the primary benefits of MXit is that it provides low cost text-based communication to mobile users (NA4). And since it is cheap, it enables users to chat and hence helps in establishing and supporting social networks (NA7). While it is true that the application provides a cheap way of communicating, the media do not emphasise the fact that the application works optimally on GPRS-enabled mobile phones (Francke and Weideman 2007). Such types of phones may not be affordable for low income users. Providing such information would give stakeholders a clear understanding of the real cost of communicating using MXit.

The truth claims were also assessed through examining the evidence and argumentation provided to support the claims, the logical consistency of arguments across the corpus and arguments or claims that were omitted in the discourse. In many of the articles (eg NA13, NA7) MXit is framed as addictive and a "hunting ground for perverse predators intent on luring children into their clutches". The claim about the application being addictive was mentioned 28 times. Although these claims appear several times in the corpus, they are not supported by evidence in the texts. One would expect such claims to be justified by using statistics indicating the numbers of victims; unfortunately none of the articles has provided such evidence.

The application is also blamed for destroying relationships. For instance, in NA18, a leader of the opposition party, Patricia de Lille, is quoted as saying "MXit is destroying marriages ..." NA3 is the only article which attempts to provide evidence on this claim. However, the role of MXit in the troubled relationships reported in the article is questionable. The article talks about a 20-year-old lady who met a man on MXit, fell in love with him, then left her "boyfriend and their two-year [old] daughter, caught a bus to Pretoria and stayed with him for a week and slept with him" (NA3). The relationship did not work and she returned to her former partner. But once again she went through the same process; falling in love with a man whom she met on MXit, and again left the partner for this second man. Unfortunately for her, when this did not work out, her partner did not take her back. This report raises questions about the claim, and about the logical consistency of the argument that MXit is responsible for destroying relationships. Considering the age of the lady, it can be argued that the lady's actions could be attributable to her personal behaviour and not necessarily a consequence of the application.

The analysis also shows an emphasis on the negative aspects of the application and the omission or under-representation of positive aspects of the application. In the corpus, many articles (eg NA9, NA19, NA23) maintain that MXit is dangerous – it can expose children to pornography and reduces children's concentration on education. While this may be true, it is worth noting that contrary evidence demonstrating advantages of the application is generally omitted. For example, MXit has been used for education purposes. The Meraka Institute of the Council for Science and Research (CSIR) in 2007 launched *Math on MXit Math* – an innovative instant messaging math tutoring programme (Butgereit, 2007). Butgereit (2007) shows that support and learning can take place through the application.

Content analysis of the corpus shows these patterns in argumentation extend through the corpus. Parents, educators and other stakeholders have expressed more negative than positive

issues about MXit. There are particular concerns that the application is becoming an obsession and affecting pupils' performance at school. It has been noted that most of these concerns come from parents and teachers.

Sincerity

Sincerity requires congruity between what is communicated and is meant or the intention underlying on the one hand, and on the other hand the intention expressed in the communication (Cukier *et al,* 2008). The sincerity of a communication may be assessed in a number of ways. The assessment could be done by considering metaphors and connotative words in the discourse. Looking at the corpus, much of the power of the discourse is in the invisible assumption, the invocation of metaphors and associative language. Metaphors can evoke belief system. For instance, the statement "MXit is a drug" (NA22) can make one view the use of the application as being as bad as taking drugs. Dominant metaphor reinforced in the corpus is "addiction" as in "MXit can be addictive" or "MXit can lead to addiction" (appearing 28 times in the corpus).

Connotative language has been used in the corpus extensively. Sometimes a simple choice of words could have a profound impact on the interpretation of the speech act. Several of the articles imply that "MXit is evil" and damaging the social fabric of society. A private investigator of Missing Children SA and eBlockwatch condemns MXit as evil; "it's a starting point for a lot of problems" (NA11). Similarly, a high school principal said "MXit is one of the major evils of the 21st century" (NA13). The term "evil" appeals to powerful emotions and values and forces the public to think the application is the root cause of the destruction of social fabric. Branding MXit as one of the major evils of the 21st century has the power to provoke strong emotions when one considers other world events that occurred in the first eight years of the 21st century (eg the 9/11 disaster and the Iraq war).

The sincerity of the claims that MXit is the root of all problems is also questionable; even before MXit, there were other applications with similar capabilities to MXit. It can, therefore, be speculated that there could be other motivations for such claims.

One may also question the sincerity of a speech act based on negative reports which have little or nothing to do with MXit but are presented in the media as related to the application. NA5 and NA15 reported teen cocaine parties that were said to be organised via MXit. Similarly in NA2, commenting on the problem of teens having sex in malls, a security guard at a mall said "I blame MXit, because these teenagers are meeting their contacts here and that's when things go out of hand." The intention of mentioning the medium used for organising the events in the discourse could be questioned; would it be worth mentioning if the events were organised using other communication channels? It could be argued that the intention here is to attribute agency to MXit for behaviours which could be explained otherwise. This is also noted in NA10; the article reports a 15-year-old girl who ran away from her home to stay with another girl. This story was reported under the heading *Cops find teen who fled with MXit man*. The heading and the opening paragraph of the story attribute the girl's predicament to MXit. However, according to an investigator the girl left home because "she wanted to sort out her life and start work". The sincerity of attributing her predicament to MXit can therefore be questioned. It could be argued that MXit is being used as a scapegoat for her situation.

Lack of sincerity is also noted in the way the defences of MXit are presented. One of the main criticisms of MXit is that it is used to distribute pornographic images (eg NA19). In defence, MXit management argues that this is impossible since images can only be sent between known contacts (NA19). The concept of "known contacts" is used here to provide assurance to concerned stakeholders. However, this assurance is not sincere, since adding a person as a known contact is not complicated and one does not need to know someone in person in order to have them as a contact. For example, NA7 talks of a boy who was chatting with a stranger and ended up in an undesirable situation. This means the boy and the stranger were "known contacts", ie they were on each others' contact list.

Legitimacy

The analysis of legitimacy claims centres on the participation; specifically inclusions and exclusions of different stakeholders in the media discourse. We find evidence of distortion in the claims for utility and accessibility when examining who is speaking about the application and its impact. Based on content analysis, it appears that certain individuals' perspectives are privileged in the discourse while others are marginalised. Most of the voices in the media come from parents (cited in 13 articles, appearing 16 times), educators (in seven articles), experts (12 articles) and MXit management (nine articles). The voices of the youth, the group most directly affected by the application, are seldom presented. Out of the 24 articles only seven talked about the youth, and in most cases as victims regretting their use of the application.

Considering who is included or excluded when experts are cited is another measure of legitimacy (Cukier *et al* 2004). Experts used included educators, psychologists, counsellors and security experts. While there are legitimate reasons why some perspectives on the MXit discourse may be more valid than others, it appears that certain experts are inappropriately included. For instance, in NA2 a security guard of a shopping mall is quoted saying the teenagers who are having sex in the mall plan their escapades on MXit. The question is: what evidence does he have to back his claim? While he has expertise on security in the mall, there is no evidence of his expertise on the technology or on teen behaviour.

It is also worth noting that MXit management's voice in the discourse is used without the media questioning the interests of MXit management. With financial interest in the product and its success, MXit management is most likely to defend and portray the product in positive light. It would be expected that the media would critically question the voice of MXit management. It is surprising therefore that none of the articles in the corpus did that.

There is also evidence of distortion in the way in which those who question and are worried about the impact of the application tend to be accused and marginalised, in most cases, by the product developer. In 15 of the 24 articles parents and educators (including psychologists and politicians) have expressed concerns about the application being addictive and exposing children to pornography. In response to such claims MXit management labels the concerned stakeholders as lacking understanding of the technology.

> *"These claims had been grossly exaggerated and misrepresented the truth. MXit's critics clearly did not understand the technology (NA1)".*

Labelling the critics as lacking understanding of the technology may be viewed as a way of silencing them. Another technique employed by MXit management to silence the critics is threatening to take legal action against them; the story in NA24 talks about "MXit is planning to take legal steps against certain newspapers and broadcast media who have described its

product as a tool for child pornography". In the interest of ideal speech, it would be expected that MXit management would engage with the concerned stakeholders in a bid to create a shared understanding of the technology and its impact.

It has also been noted that both the protagonists and antagonists of the application use appeal to emotion as a way of legitimising their respective cases. In NA16, MXit management says, "Let's not forget that a large portion of our user base is previously disadvantaged and MXit offers an affordable alternative service …" With the history of institutionalised discrimination and current government's efforts to address the inequalities, the notion of "previously disadvantaged" is strong in the South African context. In other words, if you are against MXit, then you are against assisting the previously disadvantaged.

The appeal to emotion by the antagonists of the application is mainly centred around accusing the application for destroying social values. In NA9, the leader of an opposition party accuses MXit of "destroying relationships and allowing grownup men to lure young boys and girls into traps". In NA13 a school principal, talking as a parent, appeals to emotion by stating that if MXit is not banned "we'll lose our future generation … We will surely damage the social fabric of society." Such statements need to be critically examined to see if they show a subliminal message. The argument is that such claims may use emotive appeal to legitimise the banning of the application.

Discussion and conclusions

nature of discourse

Our analysis shows that the media discourse on MXit is fraught with distortions. The information provided is selective and at times misleading. It has been noted that the articles are generally clear; however, there are cases of unjustified and unexplained use of technical terms. In addition, some important concepts are not vividly explained. It has also been noted that truth claims are partially presented and in some cases without supporting evidence. For instance, there is emphasis on the cost of using the application at the expense of the total cost of acquiring the mobile phone which can support the application. The partial emphasis on the cost of using the application may lead to impaired decision making by stakeholders.

According to the media, some stakeholders (parents, educators and experts) have expressed concerns, mostly negative, about MXit. While some of the concerns may not be disputed, it has been noted that media discourse primarily focused on the negative aspects of the application at the expense of its realised as well as potential benefits. Examples of such benefits include tutoring academic subjects like mathematics.

We have noted that regardless of the denotative content of the articles, certain perspectives are implied or reinforced through use of connotative language and metaphors. The dominant metaphor reinforced by the articles is addiction, thereby likening the use of MXit to drug abuse. We have also noted lack of sincerity on the claims made by MXit management. In most of the articles, MXit management stressed the advantages of MXit being a cheap way of communicating. However, nowhere in the corpus has MXit management acknowledged the weakness of the application. Instead of acknowledging the disadvantages identified by the antagonists, MXit management accused and sought to marginalise them as lacking understanding of the technology.

The analysis also shows that both the protagonists and antagonists of MXit use legitimacy techniques to advance their causes. The legitimacy techniques used include appeal to emotion and use of expert voices, albeit some times inappropriately. We have also noted that some

voices are privileged at the expense of others. Conspicuously under-represented in the corpus are the voices of the youth who, according to the media, are most directly affected by the application. One possible explanation for the media not considering the voices of the youth is because they are "… seen not as autonomous agents, but as being vulnerable to the negative effects of the new medium and incapable of self-regulation" (Bosch, 2008, citing Lemish and Cohen, 2005).

The analysis shows that there are positive and negative views about the application, with the positive views primarily coming from MXit management and the negative views primarily coming from the parents and educators. Both sides of the debate wittingly or unwittingly distort the information about the application and its impacts.

Explanations for differing in opinions

While the stand taken by MXit management can easily be explained by their financial interests, the motives of parents/educators for distorting information is not apparent. There is need therefore to ask what is behind the parents' motives. There are two possible explanations of the differences: differences in defining the application and moral panic.

differences in defining mxit

One explanation for the differences in opinions on the application by the different parties could be the difference in the understanding of what MXit is. The analysis shows that in some cases what the media, parents and educators are terming MXit is actually not MXit per se, but rather a broad range of cellphone-based applications. As one high school principal puts it, "cellphones had always been a problem but MXit had 'exasperated' it" [NA14]. This statement shows that the problem was around even before MXit came on the scene.

It is further noted that although there are a number of local as well as international MIMs with similar capabilities to MXit, our search on the newspaper portals did not yield any articles with a negative story regarding the other MIMs. Mig33 is mentioned in NA20; the article reports a court case of a lady who was obsessed with a girl student. In the article, it is reported that the two "made contact … on Mig33, another cellphone chat forum. The two continued to communicate by phone and via MXit." The story is also covered in NA6, however in NA6 the fact regarding Mig33 is dropped; the article reports that the two met on MXit. This omission of Mig33 exemplifies the fact that MXit is sometimes seen as a generic concept for all MIMs, therefore the blame which could also be due to other mobile phone–based applications is brought to the MXit doorstep.

It can be argued that there is a possibility that MXit management on the one hand and the parents and educators on the other are engaged in a discourse about two different products. While Mxit management is talking specifically about MXit, the parents are talking about a generalised conceptualisation of MXit. For instance, in 2006 when it was not yet possible to send images through MXit, parents were already citing evidence of images circulating via "MXit" (NA1). The parents were probably referring to images being sent by other mobile phone applications. The differences in understanding between the two parties could be mitigated by (i) ensuring comprehensibility of the media discourse and (ii) by MXit management engaging with the parents to address their concerns, rather than marginalising them.

moral panic

The parents' concerns could also be explained as a sign of a moral panic generated by the technology. Moral panic can be described as an exaggerated collective fear of a phenomenon (Goode and Nachman, 1994). According to Furedi (1994: 3), moral panic has a tendency to occur

"at times when society has not been able to adapt to dramatic changes" and when such changes lead those concerned to express fear over what they see as a loss of control. Technologies like MXit have created for the youth space over which parents and educators have little or no control, hence leaving the adults helpless (Bosch, 2008). According to Cassell and Cramer (2007), such threats and panics were also evident when the fixed telephone was first introduced for home use (as opposed to business); the telephone was seen as promoting promiscuity. The use of media discourse to discredit the application could be just one of the measures parents are employing to curb the technology responsible for perceived social problems.

Symptoms of moral panic include (i) sensationalised stories by media; (ii) getting politicians involved; and (iii) calls for legislation to control the problem of the item (Cohen, 1972). As noted in this study, the media has used sensationalised stories to emphasise the negative effects of MXit. We have also noted the involvement of politicians; for example, the leader of the Independent Democratic Party has joined the fight and is calling for the government to regulate the application. Finally, there are calls for legislation of MXit from different quarters.

Summary

Since media discourse has the power to influence how people think, it is of academic interest to analyse media discourse, which has power to influence the adoption, use and impact of IT artefacts. This article employed Habermasian validity claims on the media discourse on MXit to expose communication distortions. The analysis has shown that the media discourse on MXit is fraught with distortions. The article also noted that distortions may be as a result of lack of adequate information as well as moral panic. It may be helpful, therefore, for those responsible for introducing innovation to come up with ways to circumvent such issues by deploying popular education campaigns. ❑

Acknowledgement

This paper is a significantly revised and extended version of the paper by Chigona, A and Chigona, W, *A critical discourse analysis on media about MXit* presented at the 10th Conference of WWW Applications (WWW08) in Cape Town, South Africa.

References

Bosch, T. (2008). Wots ur ASLR? Adolescent Girls' Use of MXit in Cape Town. *Commonwealth Journal of Youth Studies* 6 (2).

Butgereit, L. (2007). Math on MXit: using MXit as a Medium for Mathematics Education. Meraka INNOVATE Conference for Educators, CSIR, Pretoria, (18-20 April 2007), pp 13

Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. and Janson, M. (1999). Communicative Action Theory: An Approach to Understanding the Application of Information Systems, Proceedings of the 10th Australasian Conference on Information Systems, (1999)

Chigona, W., Kankwenda, G. and Manjoo, S. (2008). The Uses and Gratifications of Mobile Internet among the South African Students, *South African Journal of Information Management* (SAJIM), Vol 10 no 3

Chigona, W., Mjali, P. and Denzil, N. (2007). The Role of ICT in National Development: A critical discourse analysis of South Africa's government statements, QualIT'07 Qualitative research in IT, Wellington, New Zealand, (18th -23rd November 2007).

Cassell, J. and Cramer, M. (2007). High Tech or High Risk: Moral Panics about Girls Online; In Tara McPherson (Eds.), *Digital Young, Innovation, and the Unexpected* (pp. 53 - 75). Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Chomsky, N. (1989). *Necessary Illusions: Thought control in democratic society.* Concord, ON: House of Anansi Press

Cohen, B. (1963). *The Press and Foreign Policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Cohen, S. (1972). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics.* London: MacGibbon and Kee

Cukier, W., Bauer, R. and Middleton, C. (2004). Applying Habermas' Validity Claims as a Standard for Critical Discourse Analysis, In: Kaplan, B., Truex III, D. P., Wastell, D., Wood-Harper, A. T. and DeGross, J. I., (Eds.),*Information systems research: Relevant theory and informed practice* , pp. 233-258, Boston, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Cukier, W. and Thomlison, N. (2005). Two-Tier Health-Care, Education, and Policing: A comparative Analysis of the Discourses of Privatisation, *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 47(1), Research Library

Cukier W. Ngwenyama, O., Bauer, R. and Middleton, C. (2008). A Critical Analysis of Media Discourse on Information Technology: preliminary results of a proposed method for critical discourse analysis. *Information Systems Journal* pp.1-22

Duarando, Parker and de la Harpe, R. (2007). Investigation into the Usage of Mobile Instant Messaging in Tertiary Education, Proceedings of Annual Conference of World Wide Web Application

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. New York: Longman Group

Farmer, R. (2005). Instant messaging: Collaborative tool or educator's nightmare!, *Educare review* November/December [Online, 17th July 2008] http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ERM0562.pdf

Forester, J. (1983). Critical Theory and Organisational Analysis. In: G. Morgan (ed) *Beyond Method*. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage Publications

Foucault, M. (1980). *Two lectures: Power/Knowledge*. New York: Random House

Leţcu-Fairclough, I. (2007). Populism and the Romanian Orange Revolution: A discourse-analytical perspective on the presidential election of December 2004. *Studies in Language and Capitalism* 2(1): 31–74.

Francke E. and Weideman, M. (2007). South African Youth and Mobile Technology Impact: The MXit phenomenon. Proceedings of the 9th Annual conference on World Wide Web Applications. September 2007, Johannesburg

Furedi, F. (1994).A Plague of Moral Panics. *Living Marxism* issue 73, November 1999

Gerbner, G. (1977). Comparative Cultural Indicatorsm. In: G. Gerbner (ed.) Mass media policies in changing cultures. New York: Wiley Publishing

Goode, E. and Ben-Yehuda, N. (1994). *Moral Panics: The social construction of deviance,* Blackwell, Oxford

Habermas, J. (1984). *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Boston: Beacon Press

Hansen, A., Cottle, S. and Negrine, R. (eds) (1998). *Mass Communications Research Methods.* New York: New York University Press

Inglis, F. (1990). Media theory. Oxford: Blackwell

Internet World Statistics (2008). Usage and population statistics: Africa, Retrieved August, 19, 2008 from http://www.Internetworldstats.com/africa.htm

Jensen, K.B. and Jankowsk, N. (eds) (1991). *A Handbook of QualitativeMmethodologies forMmass CommunicationRresearch*. London: Routledge

Lippmann, W. (1992). *Public Opinion*. New York: MacMillan

Michalos, A.C. (1986). *Improving YourRreasoning.* London: Prentice Hall.

Ngwenyama, O. and Lee, A. (1997). Communication Richness in Electronic Mail: Critical theory and the contextuality of meaning. *MIS Quarterly* 21:2, pp145-167

O' Donnell, D. (1999). Habermas, *Critical Theory and Selves-directed Learning, Journal of European Industrial Training*, pp. 251-261

Roode, D., Speight, H., Pollock, M. and Webber, R. (2004). It's Not The Digital Divide– It's The Socio-Techno Divide!, 12th European Conference on Information Systems, 14th June 2004, Turku.

Stahl, B.C. (2004a). The Ethics of Critical IS Research, Proceedings of the Second International Critical Research in IS Workshop, July 2004

Stahl, B.C. (2004b). Whose Discourse? A Comparison of the Foucauldian and Habermasian Concepts of Discourse in Critical IS Research, Proceedings of the Tenth America's Conference on Information Systems, August 2004

Stahl, B.C., McBride, N. and Elbeltagi, I. (2005). Combining Postmodernism and Critical Theory in the Study of IS in the Middle East – Some Methodological Considerations, 4th International Critical Management Studies Conference, Cambridge, UK, July 2005

Thompson, P.A.M. (2004). ICT, Power, and Developmental Discourse: A Critical Analysis. *The Electronic Journal on Information Systems in Developing Countries,* Vol 20, (4):1-26, 2004.

Vosloo, S. (2008). A Habermasian-based Critical Discourse Analysis of the ICT Strategies of the Centre for e-Innovation, Provincial Government of the Western Cape, Masters Dissertation, University of Cape Town

Wodak, R. (ed) (1989). *Language, Power and Idealogy: Studies in political discourse.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing

Appendix: List of articles analysed

[NA1].MXit pour cold water on addiction claims, *The Sunday Independent*, 03 September 2006

[NA2].More and more teens go to malls to have sex, *The Sunday Tribune*, 09 September, 2007

[NA3].Sordid sex scare on cellphone chat system, *Weekend Post,* 03 March 2008

[NA4].Naspers acquires 30% stake in MXit Lifestyle, *Mail and Guardian,* 26 January 2007

[NA5].Cocaine teen parties a cause for concern, *The Daily News,* 01March, 2007

[NA6].MXit messages get "obsessed" woman in trouble, *The Pretoria News*, 02 April 2008

[NA7].MXit is great, but don't be fooled, T*he Daily News*, 23 October 2006

[NA8].Parents get to grips with MXit, *The Mercury*, November 21, 2006[NA9].Anti-MXit De Lille accused of censorship, *Pretoria News*, 26 May 2007

[NA10].Lost girls in MXit drama, *The Star*, 12April 2008

[NA11].Cops find teen who fled with MXit man, *The Star*, 19 April 2008

[NA12].Tragedy strikes girl at packed ice-rink, *The Cape Argus*, 19 May 2007

[NA13].MXit to launch educational drive, *The Cape Argus*, 17 June 2007

[NA14].Exasperated principals prepare for lock down, *The Cape Argus*, 16, January 2007

[NA15].PE school girls "organised cocaine parties" *Mail and Guardian*, 24 February 2007

[NA16].MXit angered by "call for censorship"', *Mail and Guardian* 23 May 2007

[NA17].De Lille urges crackdown on blogs, *The Cape Argus,* 21May, 2007

[NA18].De Lille sets cat among pigeons in blogosphere, *Mail and Guardian*, 22 May 2007

[NA19].MXit at centre of nude teen photos uproar, *Sunday Times*, 27 May 2007

[NA20].Court hears of matriculant's lesbian chat-room affair, *Sunday Times*, 06 April 2008

[NA21].Fears about addiction to beefed-up MXit, *The Cape Argus*, 25 September 2006

[NA22].Schools seek to ban "addictive" MXit, *The Cape Argus,* 23 August 2006

[NA23].KZN families shocked by the dangers of MXit, *The Mercury*, 21November 2006

[NA24].MXit cries foul about media claims, *The Star*, 04September 2006