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The Life Cycle of a Mobile Phone

Material cultures of manufacturing and consumption



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Materialities of Mobile Culture

Moving Beyond the Interface

- Commonly been studied in the context of affordances and constraints
- Here, we want to position practice among the circulation of production, consumption, and disposal/refurbishing of these devices.
- Users are one node in the transnational mobile media landscape.



Foundational Literature

Materiality, Actor-Network Theory, and the Non-Human

Materialities and the Politics of Media Culture

- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*
- Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media*

Actor-Network Theory

- Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*
- John Law, *Organizing Modernity*

The Nonhuman

- Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto"
- *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin
- Graham Harman, *Tool-Being*



Why This Topic Matters

The cell phone represents not only our communication practices, but also our material realities.

The invisibilities of these various material realities and how such "breaks" in our understanding create consumer cultures that have deep ecological and social impacts.



Case Study: BRAZIL

Brazilian Mobile Market

Numbers:

- 280 million cell phones as of August 2015 (137%)
- 5th largest global market in absolute numbers
- 208 million pre-paid cell phones as of August 2015 (74%)

Other interesting statistics:

- Cell phones are stolen in 55% of robberies in SP
- 17% of thefts target cell phones exclusively

(Secretaria de Segurança Pública SP; teleco.com.br; de Souza e Silva et. al., 2011)

Methods

Pilot Study (15 interviews):

- 5 Sellers
- 5 Users
- 5 Rio city police (Guarda Municipal)

Case Study: BRAZIL
Uruguiana case



Case Study: BRAZIL
Uruguiana case



Results
The Vendor

1. Addressing the cell phone

a) Origin (denial and/or uncertainty)
"I just work with original products." (Seller 1)

"I don't know exactly. Some products are from China." (Seller 4)

"Ah, they show up on the hands of people who are not from here, but I believe they might be even stolen." (Seller 2)

Results
The Vendor

1. Addressing the cell phone

b) Defining the generic
"Terrible. It doesn't work. You know you will sell it and the person will come back [to complain]." (Seller 5)

"The battery discharges too fast." (Seller 3)

Results
The Vendor

2. Addressing the user

a) Motivation (pre)
"People are looking for good prices, mas sometimes if the price is too good, you need to be skeptical." (Seller 1)

b) Problems (post)
"I didn't give a receipt, and the client needed it because he needed to have the phone repaired. They asked for it, and I didn't have it, so he couldn't replace his phone." (Seller 2)

Results
The Vendor

3. Addressing the police

"They come once in a while. But they always warn us in advance that there will be some kind of police action." (Seller 1)

"We don't have (problems), because we always hide the products, so we avoid this kind of problem." (Seller 4)



Results

The User

1. Addressing the cell phone

a) Origin (uncertainty)

"There is no way to know. But it should be from China." (User 3)

b) Defining the generic (2-5 months)

"The camera was really weak. Everything was worse than the original." (User 1)

"Some times it is slow, some times it freezes... The battery is also really bad. (...) When you buy the phone, he [the seller] gives you 3 replacement batteries." (User 4)

Results

The User

3. Addressing themselves

a) Motivation

"Because of the price." (User 3)

"I was robbed. This is why I bought it." (User 2)

b) Phone Destination

"I have already been robbed about five times (laughs). And I lost another four that I left in public bathrooms..." (User 2)

Results

The Police

1. Addressing the cell phone

a) Theft

"Another common case is when people are sitting on a bus, close to the window. They have the window open, and are talking on their phones. The thief waits at the bus stop, and then when the bus starts moving again, he gets the phone through the window and starts running in the opposite direction." (Policeman 3)

b) Generic

"I don't have the official sources, but I've heard they are smuggled from countries that produce them at a cheaper price." (Policeman 3)



Results

The Police

2. Addressing the seller

Hiding techniques

"Often sales happen because of the pseudo-technical assistance. They disguise themselves as technical assistance so they can unblock and sell those (stolen) devices." (Policeman 2)

"They [vendors] do it [sell cell phones] close to a boxe. Often the boxe is not even his, but if the police arrives they hide them there." (Policeman 1)



Results

The Police

3. Addressing the user

a) Price

"They buy them [generic and stolen phones] because they do not have the means to buy their dream phone." (Policeman 1)

b) Ignoring illegality

"Users say: 'Everybody buys it' (laughs). (Policeman 1)

"(...) maybe because they have been victims of a crime, because they think they shouldn't buy cell phones in a legal way anymore, because they know these devices are sold illegally at a cheaper price. And then they are also involved in a crime, often without knowing it." (Policeman 3).

Discussion

This case study is one stop along the way in a global journey of these devices

- Begins with mining elements in the ground (coltan, copper, rare earth elements, etc), to the production of the devices, the selling (and stealing and reselling) of these devices, and the eventual disposal or refurbishing of them.



Discussion

Advocate for "infrastructural literacy"

- Lisa Parks: "Most people are socialised to know very little about the infrastructures that surround them in everyday life, whether electrical systems, sewer pipes or broadcast networks. Not only are people socialised to be unaware of such systems; infrastructures are often designed purposefully to be invisible or transparent, integrated with the built environment, whether submerged underground, covered by ceilings and walls, or camouflaged as 'nature'." ("Technostruggles and the Satellite Dish: A Populist Approach to Infrastructure")



Discussion

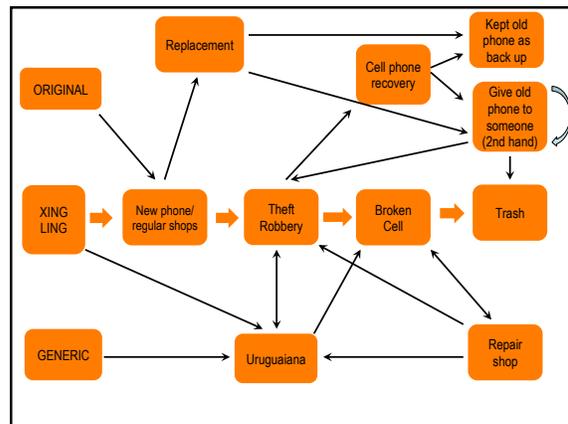
Advocate for situated media cultures

- While each phone is global in its production, consumption, and disposal, each exist within particular media circumstances
- Important to have the large scale in mind, but analyze with the specificities of a culture.



Questions?

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Case Study: BRAZIL

