

Rethinking offline social networks in semi-rural communities

 By [Marcela Ospina](#)

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"I see my son and his friends using the Mxit but I don't know what they do there. They are always on their phones. I don't have time for that, to be always on the phone... I use my phone to make and receive phone calls and SMS" (Paul, 49 years, semi-rural area).

This quotation summarises what the figures in the country reveal about the internet landscape in South Africa: the country's scarce connectivity, especially in rural and isolated communities.

In this piece, I would like to explain, firstly, that I don't consider these assumptions to be completely accurate and, secondly, I will argue that there is another perspective from which the digital divide can be looked at.

A look at the data

Sources indicate that there are still some 30 million people without access to the internet. This is almost 90% of South Africa's population. It is hard to argue with these figures when explaining to corporates why they should invest more on digital and mobile marketing. However, there is still a lot to learn from small communities with limited internet access as I will show.

Tales of the field: there is the internet and there is my internet

Every time I do fieldwork, I leave with the sensation that what I experience are glimpses of people's reality but their essence stays with them; hence, unlocking truths becomes a real challenge. I have stopped pursuing this and I now concentrate my efforts on staying with memories of the experience, including photos, a video, or just my fieldwork notes containing a powerful story.

I recently sat for some afternoons with groups of people in a semi-rural town in the Eastern Cape. Some of them played a key role in their communities, and they were quite involved in helping one another connect with the main services in the area, including the municipality and the police station.

At first, I thought the conclusions were identical to the statistics released about internet penetration in the country. This was disappointing but, as I was ready to write my notes, I realised that there could be another angle from which to look at the digital divide.

In these communities, there was a pattern which was not only common to this area but to others that I had observed in the past. This was the ongoing presence of an offline social network that kept the members of a group tight and informed. There were different ways of interaction, but the main ones I identified were as follows:

- **Connection based on a mutual need:**

Members of the community facilitate peers' access to a service they can't afford or use on their own (ie lending their phones, or speaking to another community member on their behalf).

- **Connection based on mutual interests:**

Some activities are common to many members of the community, such as going to church, watching a sport or supporting their local team.

- **Connection in order to enhance existing connections:** Constant communication with neighbours and friends is kept in order to preserve the order of the social relationships.

These unsaid rules seemed too similar to those of online social networks in which connected people participate and engage. This made me realise that those who are considered "unconnected" also have a structure for engaging but this spreads out slower than that of the digital space, because social ties are more limited and geographically restricted.

In this sense, I wonder if, as opposed to talking about a digital divide, it is possible to refer to what the internet means to those who are not connected. It is possible that being online as we know it refers to ways, generally social, in which individuals make contact with one another - via digital platforms. This, however, means something else to the "unconnected".

Some of the most common references I picked up were:

- *The internet as an object:* "I know they are on the internet because they are on their phone."
- *The internet as a place:* "Some need to go someplace else in order to connect."
- *The internet as a network of people:* "I don't have time to always be on the MXit with other people."

Aware of it

The above notions indicate that there is a physical space that is foreign to them in which a set of relationships is developed. One thing is clear: the "unconnected" do not feel that they belong to this space but they are aware of it and know of its existence.

The irony is that they are part of it indirectly. When helping each other in sorting their problems out they act like the technology itself: centralising information about people and friends, sharing it with other members of the community, and facilitating connections with main services, and with other people.

In other words, they shorten distances in their offline communities, which is similar to what online social platforms do among those in the digital space.

The future of the digital divide

The previous observation is more powerful in my view than any figures giving account of how people lack access to the internet. The point that these analyses often miss is the extent to which traditional ways of socialising can contribute to the development of new technologies.

At the same time, observing closely the way in which the "unconnected" interact may help mobile and digital technology companies understand what kind(s) of connection(s) suit(s) this group of people better.

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