

Situating Asynchronous Voice in Rural Africa

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Abstract

Designing for oral users in economically poor places has intensified efforts to develop platforms for asynchronous voice. Often these aim to assist users in rural areas where literacy is lowest, but there are few empirical studies and design tends to be oriented by theory that contrasts the mental functions of oral and literate users, rather than by local practices in social situations. We describe designing an Audio Repository (AR) based on practices, priorities and phone-use in rural Africa. The AR enables users to record, store and share voice files on a shared tablet and via their own cell-phones. We deployed the AR for 10 months in rural Africa and illiterate elders, who have few ways to use free or low-cost phone services, used it to record meetings. Use of, and interactions with, the AR informed the design of a new prototype. They also sensitized us to qualities of collective sense-making that can inspire new interactions but that guidelines for oral users overlook; such as the fusion of meaning and sound and the tuning of speech and bodily movement. Thus, we claim that situating design in local ways of saying enriches the potential for asynchronous voice.