

Town Mobiles and Country Mobiles: Exploring the Rural-Urban Dichotomy

Abstract: This presentation focuses on the rural-urban distinction of mobile user information studies. It reports on an exploratory mobile user survey conducted among a relatively understudied population of rural prairie Canadians. The findings indicate a mobile behavior that deviates from the standard observations reported in the literature gathered from urban areas and those found among many international rural mobile users. The discussion concludes by defining factors that influence future research into rural mobile populations.

Résumé : Cette communication s'intéresse à la distinction rurale-urbaine des études d'utilisateurs de services portables. Sera présentée une étude exploratoire auprès des Canadiens qui utilisent de tels services dans les secteurs ruraux des Prairies, un segment relativement sous-étudié. Les données démontrent un comportement qui se distingue de celui observé dans la littérature parmi les résidents en milieu urbain et de celui d'autres résidents en milieu rural à l'étranger. La discussion conclut le tout en définissant les facteurs qui influenceront les prochaines études sur l'utilisation de services portables chez les populations en milieu rural.

Mobile technology has proliferated and offers end users flexibility in the time and location contexts of using these devices. Wi-Fi and cellular networks provide end users with increased location independence and have incited a growing user demand for mobile access to various information resources such as weather, mobile maps, e-mail, and the web. Location in the mobile realm is typically defined as the user's changed spatial positioning, such as work, home, public transportation, and most user studies are set in an urban environment [3]. This information has risen in its prominence in mobile research due to its impact on the user's information behavior.

Studies which examine mobile information characteristics do not consistently specify location data and the descriptions of location information (e.g. points of interest) refer to urban environments. Large-scale transaction log analyses do not define typically location since this information is not necessarily embedded in log data [5, 9, 10] while others distinguish user queries derived from various countries [1, 4, 15]. Comparatively, some smaller scale studies identify cities from which the participants are from [6, 8]. For example, Tamminen et al. clearly state that their mobile study analyzes "present-day urban environments" in Helsinki, Finland [14]. However, in other smaller scale studies (8 to 19 participants), locative information is not explicit [7, 12, 13] and overall, the rural-urban dichotomy is not addressed.

In comparison to the previous studies, a more granular look at rural populations is required apart from those populations who are examined in developing countries that fit into the lower socioeconomic strata [2]. Little research has been conducted on rural populations in developed countries where the population is sparse, but the income levels are not especially low. The rural context requires further investigation due to its potential impact on user information behavior, such as accessing the mobile web, GPS (Global Positioning System) features, and other non-voice services.

This presentation reports on an exploratory mobile user survey conducted among a relatively understudied population of rural prairie Canadians [11]. Twenty-five mobile users participated in the survey distributed in August 2009. Participants reside within a well-developed telecommunications infrastructure with a low population density. The findings indicate a mobile behavior that deviates from the standard observations reported in the literature gathered from urban areas and those found among many international rural mobile users. Rural mobile behavior is compared to the mobile behavior derived from urban environments and the discussion concludes by defining factors that influence future research into rural mobile populations.

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