

The One Laptop per Child initiative, Montevideo, Uruguay, February 2011



GOING MOBILE

Phones play a vital role in activism and spreading news, says **Danica Radovanovic**

Technology experts and activists have for years attempted to bridge the gap between those with access to technology and those without, using innovative products and initiatives, like the \$100 laptop developed by the organisation One Laptop per Child.

But it takes more than a computer to bridge the gap. The mobile phone is emerging as a powerful tool for social engagement; mobile technology and social media applications are playing a vital role in giving excluded groups a voice. And mobile technologies are almost ubiquitous. Around 70 per cent of mobile phone users are in developing countries, mostly in the global South, according to the UN agency the International Telecommunications Union. Mobile phones are the first telecommunications technology in history to have more users in the developing rather than developed world – with no legacy infrastructure to service, new providers are jumping straight to mobile.

Advances in technology have made mobile phones an indispensable part of development. New mobile platforms are simple and portable. They require only simple text messaging capability to be transformed into tools for a host of activities, from providing logistical support in natural disasters to tracking violence.

In recent years, researchers and development experts have realised that the so-called ‘digital divide’ – first coined by the UN in the 1990s – fell short of adequately describing the extent of social exclusion, which also had its roots in deep social divisions. A new term emerged: ‘digital inequality’. In addition to internet access, digital inequality recognises the role that literacy, education, socio-economic conditions and access to information, knowledge and freedom of expression play in creating divisions that are then replicated online. The new, wider definition shifted the focus from the narrow view of ‘technology as liberator’ to examining the impact of ‘real life’ social inequalities, such as social status.

While access to the internet is important, it is only the starting point. And this is where mobile technology comes in. Unlike the internet, they are not hampered by slow broadband speeds or electricity shortages and can be used by people who cannot read or write. As a result, mobile phones are increasingly playing a vital role in shaping activism, raising awareness, promoting free expression and ultimately giving citizens a voice.

Ushahidi – ‘testimony’ in Swahili – is a good example of this trend. This non-profit tech company specialises in developing free and open source software to enable users to report, share, inform, interact and take an active role in their society. Ushahidi’s open-source software allows anyone with a mobile phone to tell a story about what is happening around them to a global

audience (see Heather Ford's article, pp.33-39). In a recent analysis based on 2011 data, Crowd globe, which conducts research on crowdsourcing mapping systems, documented almost 13,000 Ushahidi crowdmaps in over 100 countries. The program allows people to set up their own map without having to install it on their web servers.

In India, CGNet Swara, a mobile-based news service, was launched as a portal for the Chhattisgarh tribe, which lacks access to mainstream media. The open-source software overcomes two barriers – literacy and lack of access to the internet – by allowing individuals to report news in their own language to their community and beyond. It works like this: 'citizen reporters' call a number to record a news item, which is then verified by a trained journalist at CGNet Swara. Once a report has been approved, anyone can listen to it on their mobile phone by dialling into the same voice messaging service. The system was originally developed as a project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and is currently maintained with the support of Microsoft Research India and several volunteers (see global-voicesonline.org for more information).

NJ Mojos gives citizens a voice - and the opportunity to create content

A similar project in Australia's Northern Territory – funded by the Australian government – uses storytelling to bridge the divide between the white and indigenous populations. NT Mojos allows indigenous people to create and share their stories on their mobile phones. The project starts by teaching participants the art of storytelling before moving on to how the technology is used. In an interview with Global Voices Online, the project's executive producer, Ivo Burum, said NT Mojos is 'about increasing literacy levels and helping people think about their environment and how to convey those thoughts and stories'.

Projects such as CGNet Swara and NT Mojos not only give ordinary citizens a voice but also the opportunity to become the creators of content. This allows them to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of information such as governments, publishing houses and media organisations, which control

access to services, debate and knowledge. OpenWatch, a citizen media project run by Rising Voices (a Global Voices initiative), uses mobile technology to enable public monitoring of corruption. The free mobile phone application allows users to invisibly record audio and video before uploading to the OpenWatch website. Users without smartphones can leave voice messages.

In another example, Bangladesh's Citizen's Voice (Nagorikkontho.org) aims to empower individuals by providing a platform for feedback on public services. People can send text, voice or video messages in either Bangla or English via their mobile phones or the internet to express opinions on services, including healthcare, education, traffic and power, water and gas supply. Citizen's Voice was launched by a NGO called Population Services and Training Center.

Even commercial enterprises are following suit. In January, Wikipedia teamed up with French telecoms corporation Orange to provide mobile phone customers in Africa and the Middle East with access to the online encyclopaedia free of data charges. Wikipedia is the sixth most visited site in the world. The following month, Telenor Group, the international wireless carrier from Norway, offered the same service to its customers in Asia and south-eastern Europe.

The benefits of mobile technology in helping to bridge the digital divide are not just limited to the developing world. A 2012 Pew report by Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith entitled *Digital Differences* (pewinternet.org/Reports) noted that the rise of mobile internet use in the United States meant users on the wrong side of the digital divide were increasingly going online to find information but also to create content. The report added that 'those with no college experience and those with lower household income levels are more likely than other groups to say that their phone is their main source of internet access'.

In Los Angeles, the Mobile Voices project – an academic-community partnership between the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California and the Institute of Popular Education of Southern California – provides a platform for immigrant communities and low-wage workers in the city to tell stories about their lives directly from their mobile phones. The aim of the project is to allow participants to create their own narrative to counter the often-negative images portrayed in the anti-immigrant press.

Maureen Agena, a programme manager at Text to Change (<http://www.textochange.com>), an initiative based in countries affected by poverty and conflict, says that in Uganda and many other African countries, 'mobile technology has quickly become much more cost effective' because it does not

require internet access or knowledge of the English language. Because using the technology doesn't require specific technical skills, much of the population can access platforms like Text to Change. According to Akena, mobile phones have never been used before on such a large scale for social good. Akena also recognises the importance of this technology for women, offering them more flexibility and accessibility than they have had before. And, with a recent UNESCO report indicating that, of the world's 775 million illiterate people, 64 per cent are women, these sorts of tools for communicating and sharing information can only be a good thing.

It is clear that mobile technologies are already being used to share and access information, exchange ideas and for education and direct engagement in civil society. This trend will have more of an impact on individuals and communities as open source and decentralised methods of exchanging information are championed in a more significant way.

One of the lessons learnt is that one size cannot fit all; the barriers to digital inclusion and the needs of citizens in different regions, countries and local communities can differ. It's important to understand, too, that digital divides are conditioned in many cases by the way gatekeepers and oligarchs control access to services and knowledge and how they seek to extend and protect that control.

Meanwhile, new online publishers are striving towards open access repositories to break down those walls; civil society groups are increasingly using more open source services, software and applications to open up structures and entities in society. Around the world, disenfranchised communities are using social media and mobile technologies to unexpectedly bypass barriers erected by gatekeepers.

Through mobile and innovative technology, communities have developed projects and solutions for local problems. The question is whether emerging mobile technologies and innovative social media software will build enough momentum to help overcome 'real life' divides. We must ensure that it does. This should be our collective priority. □

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www.indexoncensorship.org

Danica Radovanovic is an expert on media and digital inclusion. She tweets at @DanicaR. Thanks to Simon Phipps for his contribution to this article