



Can a cellphone do it for a journalist?



by Megan Knight

There is no argument that the cellphone has changed the way journalists work. But cellphones as connection tools are old news. Now, we are told, what a journalist really needs is a camera-included, video-recording-enabled, MMS- and GPRS-activated cellphone. With one of these, you can take pictures, record an interview, take notes, and download the whole lot across the network, all without coming back to the office.

During the Highway Africa conference, students from the New Media Lab at Rhodes University and I worked with Nokia 7650 phones donated by MTN to gather news for the conference's newspaper and website (www.highwayafrica.org.za/hac/).

These phones are state of the art, with cameras

and audio- and video-recording functions. Unfortunately, they lack a keyboard, which makes writing copy difficult, although the T9 dictionary function does make text input with the numeric keypad far easier. The camera has no zoom function, and no flash, but is adequate for basic photography when no other option is available. Images are 640 by 800 pixels in size, fine for the web, smallish for newsprint, and useless for colour magazine production.

The video- and audio-recording functions are less than adequate: audio-recording might be useful for text journalists wanting to transcribe later, but no more. The quality is bad, and the file formats for both audio and video are uneditable by any means we could establish, and only replayable on another phone, or via the Nokia Media Player on a computer desktop. For the web, content needs to be available in the standard formats, such as MP3, MPEG and RAM.

To transfer content from the phone, there are a

number of options. If the journalist returns to the newsroom, files can be uploaded to a PC using bluetooth, infrared, or data cable. Files can also be sent via a multimedia message, either to a phone in the newsroom that can then be used to upload to a PC, as described above, or to a computer functioning as a message server, attached to the phone network. You can also email files via GPRS, or, upload via a WAP interface.

In our experiments it took several long days of tinkering, phoning service providers and help desks, and scouring bulletin boards before we could rely on getting the picture.

So, having tried to make cellphone journalism work, I'm afraid my verdict will have to be: "Nice idea, but don't sell your cybershot and mini-disc just yet."

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