

# From content to conversation

by Guy Berger

Rhodes' School of Journalism and Media Studies has R8m to try and turn cellphones into interactive journalistic devices over the next four years. The work takes place under a project titled "Iindaba Ziyafika" – meaning "the news is coming".

What it means, in short, is that – courtesy of cellphones – citizen journalism news will come to mainstream audiences via the *Grocott's Mail* newspaper in Grahamstown, and that mainstream news (at least the headlines) will reach those citizens who are generally outside the information loop.

The cash for this all is coming from two sources: there's a Chair in Media and Mobile Communications, sponsored by MTN, and a grant won in a competitive challenge issued by the Knight Foundation in the US.

What the Iindaba project is about is a triangle between the Rhodes journalism school, *Grocott's Mail*, and high school learners in Grahamstown. It involves:

- Five different sets of journalism students working on the project at various stages – some producing diverse content (including, ultimately, audio and video), others training citizen journalists, yet more developing a business model, and a group that researches the civic significance of it all.
- Eighty grade 11s learners workshoping about how to send information in 160 character SMSs (after exposure to Twitter-postings and Haiku verse).
- Open source technology for *Grocott's* to receive and publish cellphone-generated content on its pages and website – and to disseminate citizen journalism to other cellphones as well.

There's a lot of thinking that needs to roll out in all this novel effort to bridge the digital divide in both directions.

For instance, young people contributing as citizen journalists will have to learn the difference between contributing a personal opinion, and generating factual information. They need story ideas – like polling their morning assembly on a hot topic, or reporting on continued blocked toilets at their school.

And should their reports avoid sms-abbreviations? A policy needs to be debated.

Then there are the skills needed to write tight, with each letter and comma counting. Short synonyms anyone? What if the business model wants to try out adverts within the sms text – would that be 40 characters already gone?

*Can cellphones be used for journalism?*

Another issue is that for a newspaper to send out selected content streams, you have to have professional journalists tagging their stories with requisite meta-data categories – like education, entertainment, sports, or other categories. Then they also have to add free labels – like "racism", or "Nombulelo High School", or "cricket", as the case may be. Else, you don't have viable database publishing.

Also in the content management system there needs to be an extra field for entry of headlines by the reporters – this one catering for words that are tailored specifically for sms, as distinct from those to appear in the paper.

In time, there will be experiments with other cellphone communications technologies like the USSD interface, MMS, and GPRS (such as is currently used to access Mxit).

There's a new world out there for the making, and the results of this project will be widely disseminated. The software will be available freely, and because it's open source, will be easily adaptable (including being translated) elsewhere.

Canadian commentator Cory Doctorow has argued that it's a myth that content is king; saying instead that conversation is what's sovereign. "Content is just something to talk about." Anyone observing the huge uptake of technologies for talking would have to agree with him.

But there's a challenge for anyone who thinks that journalism ought also to be about a community in conversation with itself. That is: to try to increase the quotient of this particular kind of discourse and content within all the conversing.

It's summed up in transforming a one-to-one personal medium into a multi-point informational device in a way that extends the boundaries of journalism production and which brings new information and people into the public sphere.

If the project can pull this off, it won't just be the news that's coming to each side of the digital divide. It will be a community that better understands itself, and becomes accustomed to communication as a way to progress.

