MOBILE

THE CHALLENGE OF A UNIQUE NEW SPACE FOR JOURNALISM

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WHEN ONE THINKS ABOUT BRINGING TOGETHER JOURNALISM AND MOBILE COMMUNICATIONS, THE POSSIBILITIES SEEM ENDLESS. THE IDEA OF BEING ABLE TO INSTANTLY ACCESS INFORMATION WITHOUT GEOGRAPHICAL LIMITATIONS THROUGH OUR MOBILE PHONES SHOULD MAKE MEDIA COMPANIES GIDDY WITH THE PROSPECT OF ANOTHER AVENUE FOR ADVERTISING AND CAPTURING AN AUDIENCE AT UNIQUE TIMES OF THE DAY – COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE WHEN THEY USUALLY HAVE A CAPTIVE AUDIENCE.

The speed with which technology is improving in the mobile communications market is widening the scope for opportunity to engage with audiences, provide information and capture their attention for that little while longer. Current technology such as 3G wireless technologies, which allow for high-speed data transmission, and access to multimedia content, as well as smart phones and tablet computers have already illustrated the potential for users to access information that is tailored to mobile devices and available anywhere.

In developed countries such as the UK and US, news organisations are already targeting content for mobile devices and quickly tailoring not only the information they receive but the advertisements that go along with it. This means providing consumers with applications for smart phones and mobile websites which are quickly downloaded, suited to small screens and targeted to provide instant information. A competitive environment among service providers means low costs. This, coupled with the income earned in developed countries, and access to handsets and tablets with the latest applications, means that developed countries are an attractive and growing avenue for mobile specific journalism, and have meant changes in the manner in which journalism is produced and distributed.

But what about the possibilities for media organisations and journalism in South Africa within the mobile communications context? South Africa enjoys excellent mobile phone subscription rates and, according to the ITU (2009), has almost full mobile coverage of all inhabited areas (92%), and growth rates, which although they have slowed down since the initial surge in mobile communications, are still faster than developed countries (ITU 2009: 13). While this makes South Africa a leader in mobile communications infrastructure, service and access in the developing world, the manner in which mobile phones are used by the majority of the population is unique – for example the active use of "call me backs", mobile instant messaging and the huge prepaid service market. Any kind of journalistic content accessed and available via mobile phone or mobile technology has to take into account the manner in which people use their mobile phones, and the connection they have with the technology.

Mobile cellular subscriptions in Africa.
(Source: ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database.)

The South African mobile communications context

"Compared to fixed broadband, third generation (3G) mobile cellular networks seem to be holding greater potential for many countries in the region [Africa]" (ITU 2009: 8). This holds true for South Africa where fixed internet penetration is particularly low given its relatively high GDP, as a result of high prices, a regulatory environment which does not actively promote internet penetration, and an infrastructural environment which fails to ensure access in all areas. There is no denying that the internet failed to achieve the promise many initially thought, but the growth of mobile communications could be an avenue for information sharing, gathering and production which could not only provide an avenue for media organisations and a different kind of journalism, but for other organisations and the government to enable social development and perhaps even economic growth.

The South African mobile environment is dominated by two large companies, MTN and Vodacom, with CellC having a smaller share of the market. The lack of a diverse and competitive environment has resulted in relatively high prices for subscribers and users and, although access to networks is vast and operators claim 100% penetration, the figure is more likely closer to that published by the RIA Household Survey of 62% (for South Africans with mobile phones over 16 years of age) (ResearchICTAfrica). The South African mobile market is dominated by prepaid or pay as you go customers which indicates that mobile phone users do not have high incomes and are in fact from low income households (Chigona et al 2009: 6).

While these figures (see table over page) provide interesting and useful figures about who owns and uses a mobile phone, it does not tell us what mobile phones are currently being used for in the South African context, nor by who. This is crucial to examining the relationship between journalism or news and the mobile communications environment in South Africa. By understanding what people are using their mobile phones for, one is then able to examine how news will be used, distributed and produced in relation to the mobile landscape for the South African context. As a result of the fact that most mobile users purchase their own mobile phones and use a prepaid system, one can argue that the manner in which they use their phones will be determined by the kind of phone they have and the amount of money they have to spend on their phone. Although relationships between users and their mobile phones are changing and people are using their phones as more than just a communication device, the exact usage will vary and change over time and the journalistic environment has to adapt to these changes.
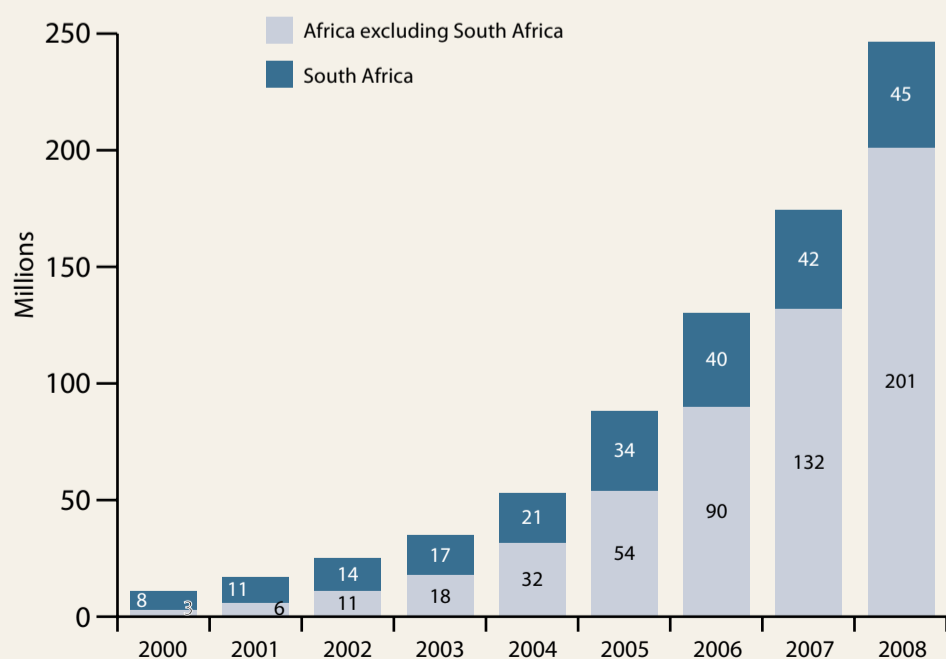
RIA household survey. (Source: ResearchICTAfrica.net)

Indicator	Value	Year	Source
South Africa 16+ with mobile phone	62.10%	2007	RIA Household Survey
South Africa urban 16+ with mobile phone	70.60%	2007	RIA Household Survey
South Africa rural 16+ with mobile phone	48.90%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Monthly average mobile expenditure in US$	15.88	2007	RIA Household Survey
Share of prepaid users	78.64%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Untapped market in million US$ based on WTP of non-users	36.27	2007	RIA Household Survey
South Africa 16+ that use the internet	15.00%	2007	RIA Household Survey
South Africa 16+ that have an email address	12.60%	2007	RIA Household Survey
South Africa 16+ that use public phones	42.00%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Average monthly fixed-line expenditure in US$	31.31	2007	RIA Household Survey
Households with fixed line	18.20%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Households with computer at home	14.78%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Households with internet at home	4.76%	2007	RIA Household Survey
Fixed termination rate	1.475		
Mobile termination rate	0.65		
Vodacom South Africa EBITDA margin	34.00%	2011	Vodacom website
Installed fixed lines (DELs)	4 319 800	2009	ITU Database 2010
ADSL subscribers	378 000	2007	ITU Database 2010
Number of public phones (fixed)	158 000	2007	ITU Database 2010

South African journalism can find a unique space on people's mobile communications devices. Journalism production and distribution, however, will have to be targeted at specific audiences with very different needs and access. Chae and Kim make the point that "we cannot simply transfer the rules of the stationary internet to the mobile internet "game" because the mobile internet differs significantly in various aspects from the stationary internet" (2003: 240). The challenge in South Africa is not only changing content from the internet for the mobile web, but also adapting it to what I regard are the two main audience types in South Africa.

The first is the low-end user, who is on a prepaid system, has had to buy their own cellphone and is very conscious of how much money they spend on their mobile phone. As a result of having to buy their own mobile phones, these tend to be basic which, although they may have mobile internet access, also have small screens and limited applications. Some users may even share a mobile phone with their parents or only have access when they borrow their friends'. Although this is not as prevalent in South Africa as in other countries, studies have shown that the practice does exist (Kreutzer 2009). Users of this kind tend to opt for cost-saving options when using their mobile phones, using techniques such as flashing or call me backs and the use of mobile instant messaging (MIM) as a communication and social networking tool.

This has seen the advent and growth of MXit, a network-independent MIM tool. "MIM is a synchronous communication tool that works on mobile devices… unlike sms, MIM uses internet protocol to exchange messages. MIMs function in a way similar to computer-based instant messages" (Chigona and Chigona 2009: 43). As a result of the fact that it is mobile-internet based, MIMs are significantly cheaper than sending sms', contributing to its vast popularity amongst South African youth and low-income mobile users. As of 2009 there were seven-million MXit users and 9 000 new subscribers daily (though this figure has been quoted to be as high as 10 million more recently). These are the kinds of audiences who are likely to use the mobile internet rather than fixed internet (because they don't have access to a PC) – there are approximately seven-million South Africans who regularly browse the mobile internet without access to fixed internet (Joubert 2008).

MXit vs Facebook vs Twitter in South Africa. (Sources: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MXit; mybroadband.co.za). Infographic designed by @ivanisawesome.

10 000 000 Mxit
3 761 160 Facebook
800 000 Twitter (approx.)

The second kind of user is at the other end of the cost spectrum: with high incomes, access to subscription mobile contracts with high-end mobile or smart phones and a greater budget for mobile communications. This means they will be able to spend more time on the mobile internet, use the mobile device for lengthy communication and buy applications to facilitate some everyday uses such as buying cinema tickets, checking event information, social networking and multi-media downloads. These kinds of users will expect high definition pictures, and video which they can view on their smart phones, tablet computers, Blackberry's and other latest technology. While this second user is a much smaller segment of the market, the reality is that these kinds of people are spending more time on their mobile platforms and demanding content of a higher quality.

Changes in journalism

The key to providing news on a mobile platform is to target content for the mobile environment. It is not enough to simply be able to access a newspaper online through the mobile phone, users should be able to access the newspaper's mobile site. "Creating the appropriate and relevant content may be a key driver for the development of a next-generation mobile infrastructure" (Feldman 2002: 352). Feldman goes on to add that "ubiquity of content does not necessarily create relevance, and pure availability does not create demand. It is context that creates relevance" (353).

The problem with mobile content in South Africa at the moment is the same kind of problem that media organisations encountered when the possibilities of publishing online were first approached. Media organisations wanted to simply cut and paste content from their hard copy printed newspapers onto their websites without tailoring content for the web. Today new media is a well established market of its own, with its own conventions, specific products and targeted audiences. Mobile journalism has to be the same. Although it took a few years for South African media organisations to grasp the potential of new media, today one sees innovative multi-media websites providing content to online users which are very different to the content being provided on their traditional platforms. This is the kind of attitude that South African media organisations and journalists have to have with the mobile environment.

The kind of news mobile users access on their cells. (Source: PRC-Internet and American Life Project and PRC-Project for Excellence in Journalism Online News. Survey – 28 December 2009 to 19 January, 2010.

	% mobile users who get this on a mobile device
Weather	26
News and current events	25
An application for news content	18
Sports scores and stories	16
Traffic info	13
Financial info	12
News via emails and texts	11

Production

The very nature of journalism won't change because of mobile communications, in that the media should continue to function in society playing the many roles that it does today – such as that of watchdog, entertainer, educator, and a voice for the people. In a country like South Africa, the media continue to play a role in democracy making, portraying and purveying the divergent and diverse discourses in society. Journalists will be able to use their mobile devices to produce the same kind of journalism, but in a much faster way that allows for information to be updated more regularly, available as events happen and easily brought back to newsrooms. I would imagine that for breaking news type events, the mobile device will prove especially useful because journalists can provide short, instant tweet-type updates of information as events are unfolding. This means journalists have to continue to look at the big picture, but also be able to summarise events into short, sharp but informative pieces which can be easily accessed by other mobile devices.

Perhaps the biggest change in journalism production as a result of the advent of mobile communications is that the users themselves will begin to contribute in greater numbers and with more diverse content to citizen journalism. Today, even the least hi-tech mobile phone is equipped with video camera capability and people are using their mobile phones to tell stories. The recent protests in the Middle East and North Africa were often reported on television with footage gathered by locals who had posted their videos (often captured by mobile phone) to social networking sites. Schoon wrote that "If your phone has a video camera, you are ready to become a video journalist. It's really not that difficult. The most important first step is to decide what to shoot. You need to consider the media audience. On our continent bandwidth is scarce, so think about what readers will really want to see." (Schoon, 2010).

I expect the production of citizen journalism will flourish with the advent of mobile communications and the fact that it's cost effective, convenient and fits in with the trend of social networking that people are currently engaged in means it could be a bigger avenue for civic engagement than the fixed web. In order for South African media organisations to tap into this wealth of information and on-the-spot reporting, they need to create avenues

for their audiences to engage with them. I think this could be especially useful for community media which can gather information, text and video based, from community members and share it with others in the same community.

Distribution

"Web content for mobile phones has for long been a neglected aspect of Web design, and many sites have not been formatted for the much smaller screen. With the recent growing popularity of mobile phones and the mobile internet in the United States and in other countries, a growing number of websites are becoming more accessible to users of the very small screens and limited bandwidth which characterizes mobile phone use" (Kreutzer 2009: 59).

The biggest change that media organisations and journalism itself must undergo with regards to the mobile environment has to do with the distribution of content. As Kreutzer has argued above, content has to be reformatted for the smaller screen, for smaller bandwidth and for the trends in mobile phone use.

The BBC's mobile website, tailored to mobile phones.

If South African media organisations don't begin to distribute their content in a tailored and relevant fashion for the mobile market, users will start to look for content elsewhere. With mobile sites such as the BBC available with news about global events, South African users will begin to draw heavily on these resources which allow for quick access to information (because the sites are tailored for limited bandwidth) and snapshots of events – perhaps even South African ones. Even beyond this, media organisations should take

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advantage of the trends in mobile communications used by different audiences to distribute content. If research is showing that users are using the mobile environment to send MIMs, check their Facebook and send tweets, why shouldn't media organisations tap into these kinds of resources to reach their audiences?

South African news and journalism should be available and tailored for mobile phone users through sms, MIMs, updates on social networking sites, updates on mobile sites, and easily accessible video, text and sound content.

Although examining the potential for publishers from almost a purely economic perspective, Joubert makes the point that "digital publishers who ignore the potential of the first screen strategy to deliver the internet to the mass market risk losing out on the massive growth potential of digital publishing in developing markets and most certainly in Africa" (Joubert 2011).

Conclusion

Regardless of whether you are looking at the distribution or production of journalism on the mobile platform, the key aspect to keep in mind for media organisations and journalists is that information has to be relevant, and targeted. If you want to target the larger low-end user then the information needs to be easy to download, cheap to access and fast to download. If you want to target high-end users, information can be more extravagant – good definition video, multi-media news stories and pictures. At the moment, South African media organisations are losing out with both these audiences to international news content and failing to provide information at the local level. The mobile market in South Africa is dominated by the wider population which has a low income and economic, and social constraints, opening a gap for community media who have the potential to play the greatest role on the mobile platform. If media organisations are able to target their content for the mobile market, journalism in South Africa will not only have found a new avenue for old audiences, but may even successfully target new audiences. If they can harness the environment and adapt content to suit the user, they will find that mobile communication will have a positive and rewarding role on the future of journalism in South Africa.

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