The Role of Cell Phones in Carrying News and Information

SUMMARY

Cell phones have revolutionized the world's communication systems in ways never before imagined. Today a farmer in rural Africa can check the price of goods on the open market as easily as someone in a major city; a volunteer with minimal training can take part in a far-reaching election monitoring program organized with a small amount of capital; and a traveler in a foreign country can find a restaurant, bank, or other essential services with the push of a button. There seems to be no limit to how cell phones can transform societies around the world, and we are only beginning to see the potential it has for development.

Yet despite how rapidly these new technologies have spread around the world, relatively little definitive information has been gathered about their impact—and even less about how they are being used for spreading news and information. What new opportunities have cell phones opened up for development organizations as well as average citizens around the world? How are journalists and NGOs integrating them into their work, and what possibilities are there for the future? In presentations and discussions during a workshop held by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), dozens of new media practitioners and interested observers attempted to clarify the trends in mobile technology use and discussed strategies for using them to convey news and information.

BACKGROUND

On November 12, 2008, CIMA hosted a discussion at the National Endowment for Democracy on the role of cell phones in carrying news and information. Approximately 75 representatives of international organizations, media development implementers, journalists, telecommunications companies, and others came together to discuss the impact of new cell phone technologies. The discussion centered on how cell phones are being used to collect and distribute information and data, as well as the future of cell phone use worldwide.

Presenters included Katrin Verclas, co-founder and editor of MobileActive.org; Raul Roman, senior project manager of InterMedia; Amy Webb, principal at the Webbmedia Group, LLC; Ken Banks, founder of Kiwanja.net and Frontline SMS; Usha Venkatachallam, chief executive officer of Appropriate IT; Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism at American

University; and Ivan Sigal, executive director of Global Voices.

The event was divided into two sessions, each consisting of presentations followed by discussion. This report outlines the presentations and discussion in the order in which they occurred.

COLLECTING INFORMATION AND DATA

Presentations:

A Mobile Voice: The Use of Mobile Phones in Citizen Media

Katrin Verclas, Co-Founder, Editor, MobileActive.org (www.mobileactive.org)

Verclas told participants:

- The cell phone is the single most transformative technology ever, especially for development. People are connected worldwide as never before.

- It is the first technology that has grown more rapidly in the devel-oping world than in the developed world. She said it is estimated that there will be 4 billion cell phones worldwide by the end of 2008, and 59 percent of recent growth has been in the developing world.

- Mobile phones are fundamentally changing the way people consume and produce media. The technology is changing the media landscape, but people are still grappling with what the future will bring.

- MobileActive.org has published a report on the technologies used in citizen media worldwide ("A Mobile

Voice: The Use of Mobile Phones in Citizen Media," http://mobileactive.org/mobile-voice-use-mobile-phones-citizen-media). The report recommends participatory and user-centric (demand-driven) design, an enabling environment for the development of mobile technology, improved content, and innovative use of existing technologies.

Mapping Cell Phones and Trends: Who, Where, Why, and How

Raul Roman, Senior Project Manager, InterMedia (www.intermedia.org)

Roman told participants:

- InterMedia surveys cell phone use around the world. Data gathered in two countries—China and Nigeria—and two cities—Mumbai and Moscow—illustrate trends in the use of cell phones for receiving news.

- While cell phone penetration is greater in China, a similar percentage of cell phone users in Nigeria use them for news through services like Short Message Service (SMS or text messaging).

- In both countries, cell phone ownership is an urban phenomenon, skewed particularly toward youths. Nevertheless, rural ownership is growing much faster than in cities. Urban dwellers use their cell phones for news much more than rural people, who tend to use them for checking market prices of goods, getting weather forecasts and other tasks essential to their livelihoods.

- In Moscow, cell phone ownership and use for news have grown

steadily in the past few years—in in Mumbai, these numbers have grown exponentially in the same time.

- Cell phones should be regarded as complementary to other technologies, not as a substitute.
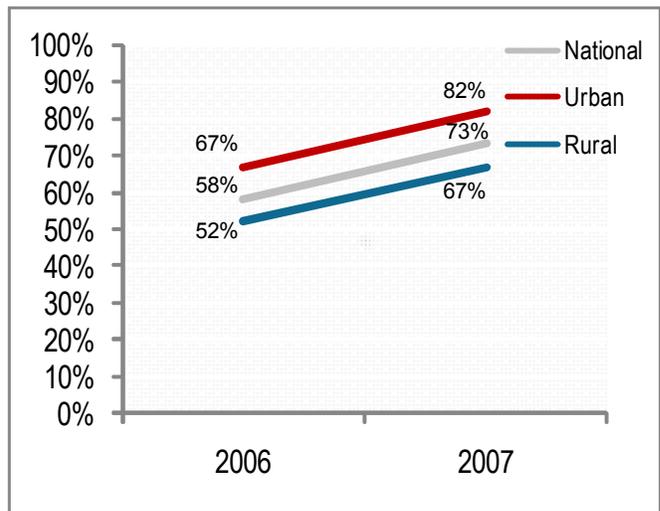
More research is needed on the quality and nature of SMS-based news and on whether people who get their news via their cell phones are well informed.

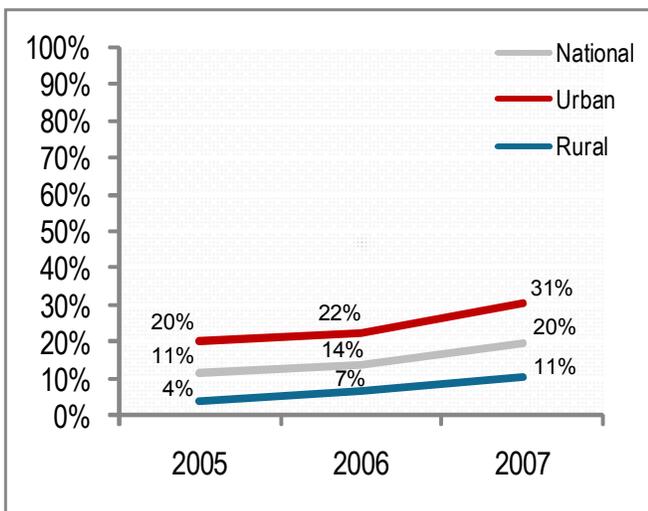InterMedia gathered the following statistics in surveys from 2005 to 2007:
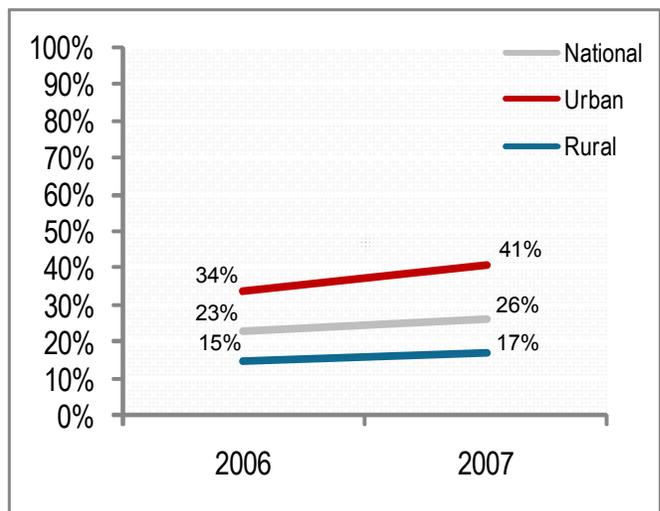
Cell Phone Ownership in Nigeria
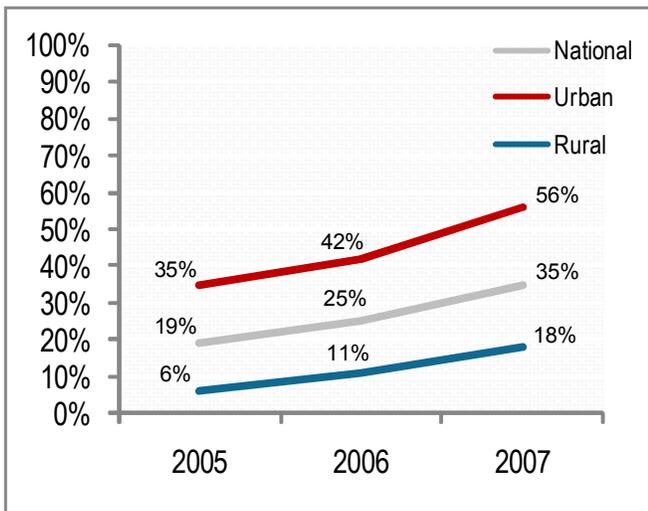
Cell Phone Ownership in China

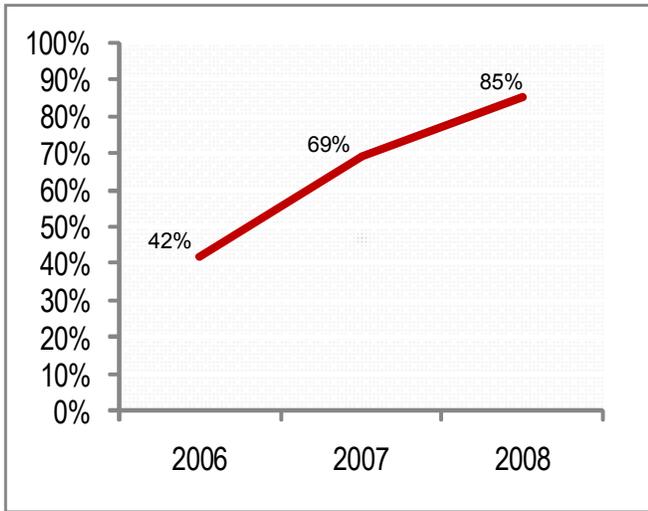**Weekly Use of Cell Phones and Internet for News in Nigeria**

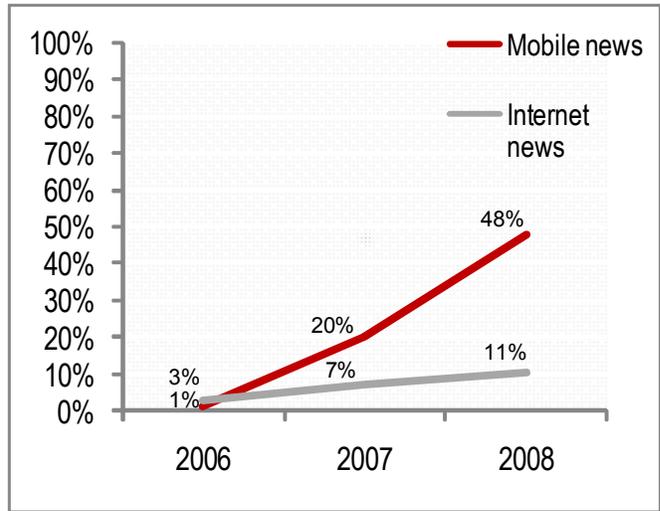**Weekly Use of Cell Phones and Internet for News in China**

- Live in Urban Areas: 71%
- 34 Years Old or Younger: 77%
- Male: 58%
- Have Higher Education: 24%

- Live in Urban Areas: 59%
- 34 Years Old or Younger: 58%
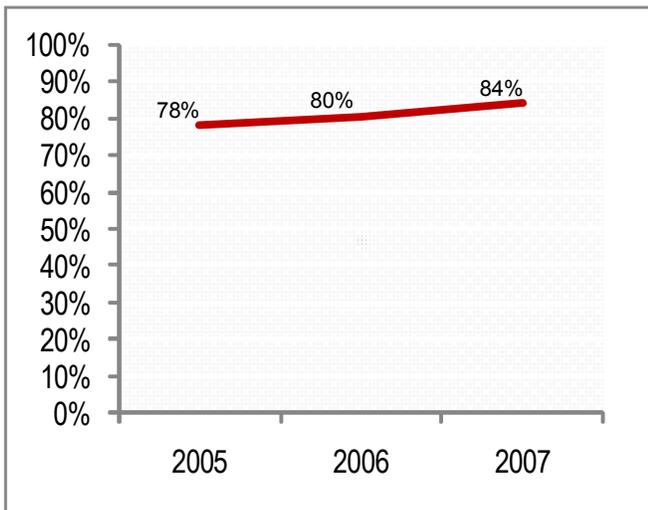- Male: 50%
- Have Higher Education: 21%
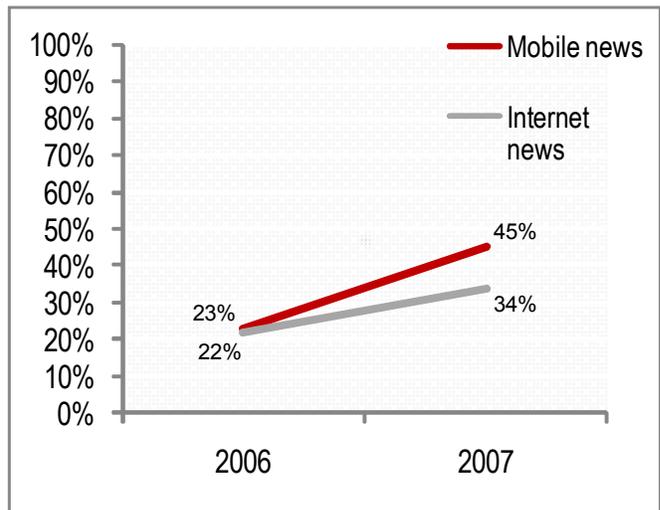
Cell Phone Ownership in Mumbai, India

Use of Cell Phones and Internet for News in Mumbai, India

Cell Phone Ownership in Moscow, Russia

Use of Cell Phones and Internet for News in Moscow, Russia

- Mobile Users Who Use Their Cell for News at Least Once/Week: Over Half
- 34 Years Old or Younger: 65%
- Male: 70%
- Have Higher Education: 35%

- Mobile Users Who Use Their Cell for News at Least Once/Week: Over Half
- 34 Years Old or Younger: 43%
- Male: 42%
- Have Higher Education: 88%

MoJo: Integrating Mobile Telephony into the Media Development Matrix

Amy Webb, Principal, Webbmedia Group, LLC (www.webbmediagroup.com)

Webb told participants:

- The U.S. has a distorted view of how technology is developing because so much of the new applications and technology are in the developing world.

- It is important for groups wishing to use cell phone technology to realize that it is not a one-way street; information can be sent both to and from users. News organizations should be inviting responses to their stories via SMS.

- The "geospatial web" of mobile phone networks combines the user, the user's data, and the user's location, making unprecedented levels of personalized information available on a cell phone. Several applications are already available that can provide a user with information about his or her surroundings automatically.

- A variety of innovative mobile phone applications listed at http://www.mydigimedia.com/CIMA.html.

Discussion

Participants discussed whether it is possible to measure the impact of these new technologies, because they are changing so rapidly, with so many applications available that consumers are unaware of many of them. There has been very little comprehensive research done on mobile phone impact, with case studies reflecting secondary impact—such as on food price fluctuations based on the introduction of mobile technology, health care issues, and humanitarian assistance projects.

The role of cell phone technology in helping the spread of democracy was also discussed. Mobile phones have been instrumental in several election monitoring projects, particularly those organized by the National Democratic Institute in a number of countries, including Sierra Leone, Indonesia, Montenegro, and Albania. Several

participants suggested that more democracy assistance organizations need to look at how mobile technology can help them work more efficiently.

A number of participants also brought up the way cell phone technologies are changing traditional journalism, particularly with the ability of citizen journalists to gather information more rapidly than professional news outlets. Participants agreed that there needs to be more monitoring of the content of news that is delivered via cell networks to determine its quality.

Asked how cell phone applications spread among cell phone users, particularly those who are poor and uneducated, Roman said that 80 percent of people in urban areas of China learn about new applications from family and friends. There and elsewhere, he said, many applications are spread among the young urban elite. One participant suggested that development organizations and others wishing to get out their message should target such groups to reach a wider audience.

Participants also discussed the dangers presented by these new technologies—many of the features that make them so useful can also make them dangerous. At the simplest level, cell phones can be used to send false information and rumors. Perhaps more troubling to some participants is the ability of oppressive governments to utilize GPS-enabled phones to monitor citizens. Webb explained that this feature can be turned off but that users would then be unable to utilize the "geospatial web" she had described. Encryption of data was suggested as a possible safety measure, but one participant pointed out that even that could attract the attention of authorities.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION AND DATA

Presentations:

Providing Support to NGOs and the Frontline

Ken Banks, Founder of Kiwanja.net and Frontline SMS (www.frontlinesms.com)

Banks told participants:

- There are many societies around the world whose citizens do not have access to basic information such as the name of an important drug, sports scores, or the name of an organization doing critical work in their area.

- Frontline SMS is a platform designed to allow communities of users (both on cell phones and other communication devices such as computers) to participate in two-way communications on various topics.

- The application is a sort of "Swiss army knife" that has been applied successfully to election monitoring, health alerts and other projects in places such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Malawi, Afghanistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Philippines, and Indonesia's Aceh region.

- The features that have made this application successful can be applied by others who want to develop their own applications:

  o The software is free and works on available hardware;

  o Projects are locally run and the implementing organizations own the data;

  o The application builds on local awareness;

  o It is highly replicable and scalable to fit varied needs;

  o Internet access is not necessary;

  o The application is easy to use, not requiring special training;

  o The software is driven by users' needs in a bottom-up fashion.

Mobile Phone Technologies: To Infinity and Beyond?

Usha Venkatachallam, CEO, Appropriate IT (www.appropriateit.org)

Venkatachallam told participants:

- Cell phone use is growing exponentially, particularly in the developing world. The U.S. market is nearly saturated, which is part of the reason innovations are coming increasingly from the developing world.

- Organizations wishing to develop cell phone applications need to first consider end users—what kinds of cell phones do they use, and what do they want them to do? The most popular cell phone in the world is a basic Nokia model that has minimal features but is very reliable.

- Many would be surprised to learn what mobile networks are already capable of; they have a lot more potential than we realize.

Innovative New Media Projects: Citizen Journalism and Participatory Reporting

Jan Schaffer, Executive Director, J-Lab: The Institute for Interactive Journalism, School of Communication, American University (www.j-lab.org)

Schaffer told participants:

- The use of cell phones for gathering and disseminating news is part of a larger shift worldwide toward citizen media, which gives ordinary citizens the ability to spread and receive information as never before.

- There are a number of sites that can empower individuals to share news and information. Some news services are even using citizen reports in their official news coverage.

- News services generally look at the spread of cell phones as just another platform through which they can have citizen participation. Some of these organizations have begun to look at each technology as a potential network for their information. Examples include CNN's use of iReport.com, MSNBC's *First Person*, the Associated Press's Mobile News Network, and EveryBlock.com, which compiles hyper-local news in a database covering 11 cities.

Mobile Reporting: Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Information

Ivan Sigal, Executive Director, Global Voices (globalvoicesonline.org)

Sigal told participants:

- Global Voices is a service that allows citizens to report on developments around the world through blogs that are translated into 18 different languages. As a result, communities that would normally never interact are able to communicate. Global Voices volunteers bring context to the site's blogs by reading related blogs and linking to them or taking excerpts from them.

- People on the ground are often able to beat professional news organizations and post their observations with about the same level of accuracy.

- Media are no longer just local or national phenomena; all events can become global. For example, when there was a dispute over the U.S. bombing of a village in Afghanistan, a local person with a cell phone was able to prove that many of the victims were not terrorists.

- To be truly effective, humanitarian projects should be designed for very specific outcomes. They should also link back into real grass-roots organizations rather than deal only with virtual communities.

Discussion

Participants discussed the impact citizen reporting through cell phones has had on traditional journalism and what the future will bring for this medium. Participants agreed that it is still unclear how the news media will adapt to the influx of information from citizen journalists. One participant described the changing journalism landscape as a shift from product to process—a story is never complete, and people can discuss events as they are happening.

Several participants described examples of how governments can use cell phone

technology to benefit their citizens. Some health ministries in Africa have begun partnering with telecom companies to provide citizens with important health information. Other countries have begun allowing citizens to pay for public services with their cell phones and some have begun using cell networks to keep citizens informed during emergency situations. These uses are all entirely dependent on governments.

Participants also agreed that the media development community needs to go beyond its comfort zone and reach out to development organizations to encourage them to use cell phone technologies. Many groups are unaware of the potential benefit mobile phones could have on their work or how to go about utilizing these new technologies. There should be greater cooperation between media developers and other development communities, participants said.

Several participants discussed methods of using cell phones to spread information other than through SMS. Picture and video messaging have the clear benefits of being able to spread images, while audio services such as radio-phone projects provide users with news stories that they might be unable to read. Mobile Web applications for cell phones offer some of the greatest potential for giving people who would otherwise not have it access to the Internet, though these technologies are slower to spread because of their cost. Participants agreed that SMS is likely to remain the predominant method of communication in the near future.

Mobile phones have affected rural and urban dwellers in different ways, participants agreed. Rural populations often are interested in different information than their urban counterparts, yet the two groups share a great deal of information (via cell phones and other media). Much of the information

being spread among rural areas originates in urban settings, but one participant suggested this might change, as rural populations are more interested in news that directly affects them.

GOING FORWARD

Over the course of the half-day's presentation and discussion, broad agreement was reached on several points:

■ **Rapidly evolving technology is difficult to track**—Cell phones are clearly a revolutionary technology for the developed and developing worlds alike. Yet the rapidity with which this new technology is changing makes it difficult to firmly understand exactly *how* it is affecting the world. Statistics are hard to come by, and most examples of impact are anecdotal. Additional study of the uses and impact of cell phone technologies would be extremely beneficial and could help development organizations better integrate these technologies into their work.

■ **The best ideas come from the bottom up, not from the top down**—New cell phone technologies are demand-driven, and development projects using mobile technology should be too. Looking first at how the target audiences use their cell phones will help development organizations more successfully tap into their potential. Any projects using cell phones should be built from the ground up, based on what people are interested in and on what technology will allow them to do.

- ■ **Cell phone technology is a two-way street**—Organizations that disseminate information through cell phones are creating networks that did not exist before. These networks enable users to discuss the information they receive, and to debate what is credible and what is unreliable. Providers of information should invite users to respond and comment.

- ■ **Cell phones highlight immediacy, but content still matters**—Citizen journalists can use cell phones to cover events and distribute information faster and more efficiently than traditional journalists. But not all citizen journalists are created equal, and those who publish their information must take steps to ensure accuracy and credibility. It is dangerous to let technology alone drive changes in media, and in the end, a mix of traditional media and new media is probably best.

Summary by: Spencer Hayne
CIMA Staff

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director