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SMS changes the game

By Dr Pieter Streicher, MD at BulkSMS.com

According to Clay Shirky, renowned digital media commentator, “communication tools don’t become socially interesting until they become technologically boring.” Now while I’ll never consider SMS boring, I’d argue that SMS has become so entrenched in our day-to-day lives that it meets this criterion, and has not only become socially interesting, but is impacting our society in significant ways.

“The moment we are living through is seeing the largest increase in expressive capability in human history” says Shirky. SMS is definitely a critical role player in this increase in communication and expression, from dating services, to weather reports to fighting crime or reporting on political unrest.

Take, for instance, Ushahidi, a crowd-sourcing platform developed to track Kenyan election violence in 2008. Since then it has been used as far afield as the USA, Haiti, India and Chile to report on natural disasters, political unrest, the spread of diseases, wildlife conservation and corporate behaviour. One of the key channels Ushahidi uses to gather information from people on the ground is SMS. This is no surprise as almost everywhere you go in the world people have access to a mobile phone and the ability to send an SMS.

Figures released earlier this year by mobile maven TomiAhonen show that 53% of the world’s population and 78% of the world’s mobile phone users send and receive SMSs. If you look at the overall number of users, SMS eclipses email by 2.6 times, despite email having been around for 39 years, and SMS for only 17.

On an individual level, SMS is being used in clever ways to literally revolutionise communication. BulkSMS.com customer, Abrie van Wyk suffers from cerebral palsy and so has difficulty communicating with family, friends and the customers of his small business. But using BulkSMS’s computer-to-phone SMS service, Van Wyk can successfully communicate both socially and commercially. “A new world opened for me,” he said.

Likewise SMS is breaking down communication barriers for deaf people around the world, for both deaf and hearing people. SMS means that deaf and hearing people can speak the same ‘language’; and also that deaf people can build those all-important ‘weak’ connections because SMS expands their communication from face-to-face engagements only.

Similarly farmers in rural Kenya are no longer subject to the whims of market prices thanks to SMS. Now they can check the price they will receive for their stock via SMS before leaving home, they can choose which market is paying more for their specific produce. And, so is more attractive for them, rather than turning up at a market and being forced to accept the prices, favourable or not. This is a very vivid example of how the spreading of information via SMS has shifted the balance of power in favour of a previously enormously economically disadvantaged group of people.

Shirky’s primary point is that “it is not when the shiny new tools show up that their uses start permeating society, it is when everyone takes them for granted.” This is certainly true for SMS if you look at its rapid



adoption in Africa and other third world regions thanks to the lack or scarcity of alternative communication channels such as fixed lines and email. SMS is easy to use, readily available, and relatively inexpensive.

Not surprising then that many grass root innovations, clever ideas that the phone manufacturers almost certainly never dreamt of, take place in Africa. From SMS banking notifications launched by FNB in 2002, to SMS reminders to take anti-retrovirals and other vital medication, to SMS-enabled home security systems.

Not everyone shares this enthusiasm for SMS. Governments of countries such as Mozambique, India and Egypt have recently temporarily shut down SMS services, as it was seen as providing citizens with too much people power. Governments that wish to muzzle public criticism now have to shut down entire services, causing major economic and social disruptions.

As these trends show, in a world of shiny new technological tools the familiar workhorse, SMS, is by far the technology that has most become part of our society and is paying its way in terms of the development of social capital in enabling people to express themselves or access information that allows them to make meaningful economic or life choices.