

Mobile... the lost opportunity

Mobile has found its market, but the pioneers have lost their opportunity and it will take a far-seeing executive to challenge for the position again.

As far back as 1996 at a Highway Africa conference at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, South Africa, I outlined the journalist of the future... One who would work across multimedia platforms, easily able to circumvent government restrictions in times of turmoil or simply to prevent a curious world sneaking a peak at a dubious human rights record.

Those days have arrived and are currently most clearly evident in the post-presidential election violence sweeping Kenya. While that country's government is clamping down on local news platforms, dedicated bloggers are updating their sites through mobile phones keeping us abreast of developments there. An example is Emma Hurd, Sky's reporter *in situ*, who broadcasts live video via broadband.

However, it is only those with the latest technology and know-how that are able to truly project the horror of the post-election violence. A quick sweep of the online TV and newspaper suite from Kenya provide a relative calm, almost benign, view of the developments – a far cry from the horror projected in the Sky News coverage of murderous thuggery in the slums of Kibera.

All of this is a product of the oft-spoken, but dreadfully implemented convergence model in media.

The first real success at that with careful planning has been at the Telegraph in London where the focus is exclusively multimedia. They combined newsrooms, retained excellence and shed heads - almost 200, I believe. We in South Africa do it differently. The Johncom initiative to extend the *Sunday Times* into a daily to support weekend subscription growth comes at a high cost with largely separate reporting and managing crews and unfortunately, little or no advertiser support. The costs will have rocketed when maybe the true convergence model should have been adopted and economies achieved.

But back to the real task at hand. The role of mobile technology in reporting is growing exponentially with handset growth. Africa is a particular example of success and will leapfrog its way to the forefront. Advanced mobile technology generally reaches us first – sometimes six months ahead of first-world mobile markets like UK.

New phones are able to combine voice and video in real time communication, hence the content quality of immediate response communications from far-flung destinations.

The importance of mobile in the conventional and citizen reporting sectors in Africa will become more apparent as mobile phone ownership burgeons over the next four years.

Currently 1:7 mobiles bought daily is bought by an African. In four years time 50% of continental Africans will have mobile phones with high-end capabilities. This poses an interesting dilemma for those governments clinging to old-style autocracy or those like Kenya presidential “winner” Mwai Kibaki. They will have been rendered virtually powerless by citizen journalism as their every move will be documented and broadcast to mass audiences worldwide by internet. As broadband access on the continent grows (witness the recent sale of Africa Online to Telkom SA and the potential for satellite redistribution of redundant bandwidth from the existing SAT 3 undersea cable as well as the new one planned to service the East coast), suddenly even your neighbours will be better appraised and keener to push for reforms in their own countries on the evidence of repressions from next door.

In far back 2000, I was appointed to head the group Marketing and Media operations of the African Lakes Corporation focusing predominantly on the Africa Online brand which was the chief protagonist in connectivity in many African countries. The company also owned hundreds of branded internet cafes, which provided more than just access – education, entertainment and more. It also had interests in the Middle East, owning Egypt's number two connectivity supplier menaNet, as well as shares in Menanet subsidiaries GDBC which redistributed satellite bandwidth.

In developing a content response to the Africa Online brands subscriber base, we wanted to offer a more diverse media collection and distribution option for sales to supplement the advertising-driven business plan that underwrote the brand's move to a content portal for the whole of Africa.

Colleague Ben Parker (no relation) and I developed a multi-functional content platform with an Apache base to ensure that we could aggregate exclusive and syndicated content from every territory in which we operated and republish in internet, mobile and rip-and-read community radio station bulletin style.

The instructions were simple. No intro longer than 160k (that was for mobile back then, but has changed now). This provided a quick mobile read, an obvious headline reference for the site and a short sharp introduction for radio. We then expanded on this for the online and radio platforms to provide a single source content operation that could be bought for a fee and syndicated across continent. Mobile operators could charge for it in their call fees, guaranteeing an income. Non-competitive online agencies could provide an extra element of stickiness as was popular in the early days. It remains important, but the rules of engagement have changed. In addition, the Africa Online brand would be supported across pan-African radio with doughnut spots topping and tailing news reports relevant to that country provided by us. As mobile developed so we were able to provide more content from further flung operations.

Had Africa Online continued to support this model it would have found itself at the forefront of electronic communications in Africa now, rather than being swallowed by the SA Telkom giant. But the reasons for that differ from the obvious.

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