

Young people, mobile phones and the rights of adolescents

*by Graham Brown,
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With only five years left to meet the Millennium Development Goals, much remains to be done to ensure equitable access to technological advances in underserved and hard-to-reach communities, especially among young people. Working at mobileYouth, I have seen how adolescents are using mobile technology in new and groundbreaking ways. Emerging markets dominate the growth of this technology. Alongside the throng of street urchins and trinket sellers in Chennai, India – to take just one example – local schoolchildren surround a makeshift stall. You might mistake it for an ice cream vendor, but this stall is actually selling mobile phones. In a country where the average gross domestic product per capita is around \$225 a month and Internet access via personal computers (PCs) is the exception, it is no coincidence that youth (defined here as those aged 5–29) have gravitated towards mobile phones, which cost as little as \$10 and offer call rates that approach zero.

Three of the five markets with the highest numbers of mobile accounts among young people are developing countries: Brazil, China and India (Japan and the United States are the other two). By 2012, the number of subscribers below the age of 30 in South Asia is projected to rise by 30 per cent, to 380 million, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to have 108 million subscribers under 30, and Latin America, 188 million. This increased connectivity offers an opportunity for young people to access knowledge and fulfil their right to information.

Although it was long thought that low-cost laptops would unlock the world of cheap mass communications for youth in developing markets, the mobile phone has become the de facto access channel to the Internet in places where there is low PC penetration. In South Africa, for example, mobile phone subscriptions among youth outstrip PC ownership by as much as 123 per cent.

Back in 1996, nobody imagined that Short Message Service (SMS), a format that limits messages to 160 characters, could be of any use apart from receiving a simple test signal from your mobile carrier. How wrong we were. By experimenting with and exploiting the medium, young people evolved the format before returning it to the commercial world. While we struggled to conceive of a successor to SMS, investing heavily in picture messaging (MMS) and similar services, youth once again arrived at the answer without industry intervention. They adopted, adapted and converted services originally intended for business – such as BlackBerry Messenger – into their own medium, not only to communicate among themselves but also to advance social campaigns.

Young people are keen to take up new content formats, with adolescents in particular having the time to explore and exploit new technologies. SMS, in turn, is being challenged by mobile Instant Messaging (IM), which is becoming the platform of choice owing to the increasing number of users,

lower costs, popularity in emerging markets and the widespread growth of mobile Internet everywhere. Brazil has 18 million mobile IM users, representing 23 per cent of the country's mobile youth. In India, 87 million – 31 per cent of mobile youth – claim to be mobile IM users.

In the slums of Cape Town, South Africa, against a backdrop of gang violence, social entrepreneurs like Marlon Parker – founder of the non-profit Reconstructed Living Labs (RLabs) – show how technology can empower adolescents to change their lives. For example, Jason, aged 19, has spent the last four years transforming himself from petty thief to community role model using mobile chat, Facebook and texting. In conjunction with Drug Awareness Week in South Africa, RLabs and Mxit – South Africa's leading mobile social network – recently launched a live Drug Counselling Portal called Angel, which offers young people 24-hour mobile access to information and support. Since its inception, the portal has attracted more than 23,000 users, filling a gap in social services important for young people and children.

The landscape has shifted significantly in less than a generation. We can no longer rely on specific organizations to be the sole agents of change; the speed at which issues arise and crises strike requires that we supplement more traditional modes of organizing with the kinds of youth-led grass-roots movements

made possible through mobile phone technology. Directed onto the right track, such movements could create cost-effective and easily deployed platforms for social change. Imagine, for example, the millions of girls under 18 living in rural India: How many of them – if armed with a mobile phone and supported by youth non-governmental organizations – have the potential to become advocates who proclaim an alternative message of hope? The world's mobile youth will not only change the nature of mobile markets; they will also transform the development community's outreach to promote social change and realize adolescents' rights.

Graham Brown is one of the founders of mobileYouth <www.mobileyouth.org/>, the world's largest aggregator of data on youth mobile phone use. He hosts the youth marketing stream on Upstart Radio and mobileYouth's own TV channel. A widely published writer on issues related to young people and mobile technology, Mr. Brown is also a judge on the Mobile Marketing Association's Award Panel and an advisor to the Global Youth Marketing Forum held in India in 2010.

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