



[Top](#) [Technology](#) [Culture](#) [Politics](#) [Columns](#) [Blogs](#) [Wired Mag](#)

Text Size: [A](#) [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)

a gazillion free online videos
only a bot could love

aol.c
see what's here for

Text Messaging Feeds SARS Rumors



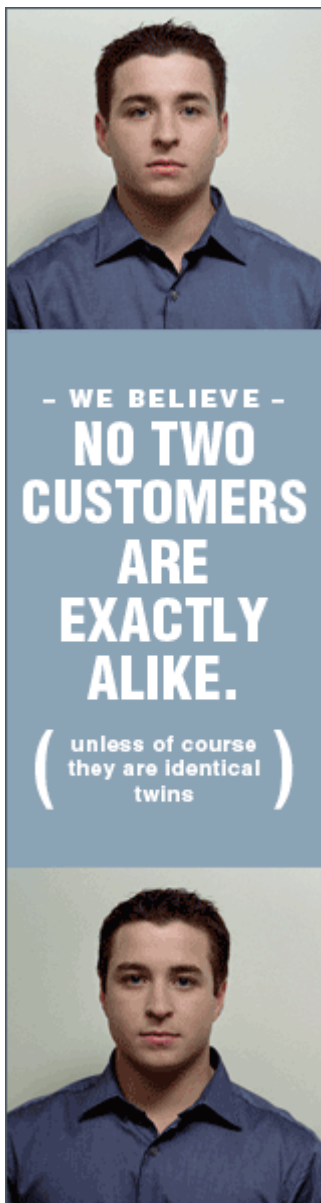
PRINT



MAIL



RANTS + RAVES



See Also

- [SARS Gene Sequence Unveiled](#)
- [Singapore SMS: Tlk Drty 2 Me](#)
- [Mobile Junkies Reshaping Society?](#)
- [Unwired News: The Next Generation](#)

By [Xeni Jardin](#) | Also by this reporter

02:00 AM Apr, 21, 2003

As residents throughout Asia adjust to daily life in the midst of the SARS outbreak, a small Hong Kong telecom carrier has introduced a new SMS tool to help locals avoid infection sites.

The text-messaging service pinpoints the locations of confirmed cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome. It's one of many ways people in the region are using mobile technology to cope with the disease.

Launched by Sunday Communications, the service allows subscribers with SMS-enabled phones to identify the "contaminated" buildings within a kilometer of their calling location. Subscribers can also learn which buildings visited recently by patients suspected of having SARS, or "atypical pneumonia," as the disease is known throughout much of Asia.

The service uses infection-site data the Hong Kong Department of Health began publishing daily on April 12, 2003. To access the SARS updates, callers dial a three-digit number to receive a text message in English or Chinese.

Throughout Asia, mobile technology is playing a prominent role in the spread of both official and unofficial SARS information.

Earlier this month, the Hong Kong government sent millions of mobile text messages to residents to [debunk a hoax](#) that led many to believe that the city was soon to be formally declared "an infected place," causing mass panic and buying binges throughout the region.

"Chaos, fear and disorder spread faster than good news," says Hong Kong-based entertainment consultant Brett Elliot. "Because SMS notes are terse anyway, disinformation seems to spread even faster because you don't get the whole story."

The slow pace and incompleteness of the Department of Health's previous disclosures about the spread of SARS had become the subject of controversy, inspiring the launch of unofficial websites like [sosick.org](#).

Organizers of that alternative site voluntarily shut it down this week after the health department began publishing daily Web updates. The site shutdown included the online statement that they'd achieved their goal of "successfully pressuring the government to release information on infected locations."

Recent Chinese government efforts to distribute regular digital updates may be inspired to some degree by criticism of its unwillingness to release facts about SARS cases early on -- which may be partly responsible for its rapid spread.

To date, Hong Kong Department of Health statistics show that 1,268 people in Hong Kong have become sick with the disease, and 61 have died. Worldwide, over 170 fatalities have been attributed to SARS, according to the World Health Organization.

Sunday Communications also announced it will donate 1,000 rechargeable SIM cards to the Hong Kong Hospital Authority to help hospitalized SARS patients stay in touch with family and friends. Hospital officials could not be reached for comment on whether the ban on cellular phones within hospital perimeters would be lifted for this purpose.

Singaporean advertising executive Kim Lai says mobile messaging has quickly become a key element of the SARS chatter that now permeates daily life.

"With SARS, you feel like the SMS sender cares about the recipient and wants to keep in touch," Lai says. "But because of the text-message rumors, people are wary of crowded places, and anyone who sneezes or coughs in a crowd gets a lot of attention."

Story continued on [Page 2 »](#)

Rants & Raves

[refresh all](#) | [expand all](#) | [collapse all](#)

Want to start a new thread or reply to a post? [Login](#) / [Register](#) and start talking!

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Wired News: [Contact Us](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Subscribe](#)

We are translated daily into [Korean](#) and [Japanese](#)

Wired.com © 2006 CondéNet Inc. All rights reserved.

Your use of this website constitutes acceptance of our [User Agreement](#) and [Privacy Policy](#)