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PAKISTAN FRONTLINESMS

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Ken Banks offers coaching, mentoring and strategy support.

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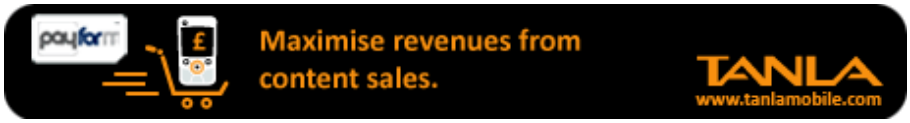

Mon, 26 Nov 2007 15:35:22

News: Pakistan Activists Use FrontlineSMS

Submitted by Mike Grenville on Mon, 19 Nov 2007 12:10

FrontlineSMS is being used in Pakistan by some bloggers to get news in and out of the country.

Due to the nature of on-going censorship attempts by the Government of Pakistan as a result of General Musharaff's imposition of martial law in the country, formerly known as a state of emergency, the Society Against Internet Censorship in Pakistan started blogging live updates on the situation as it unfolded on the ground.

Some activist groups have seen the need for an SMS-based reporting and co-ordination system for information clearing to provide support for a civil disobedience movement against martial law. This was to be in the form of flash peace rallies and candlelight vigils, among many other initiatives that members of civil society deemed necessary and practical.

Although some of the major news agencies were reporting that SMS and cell phone coverage had been jammed, it was only partially true with mostly just parts of Islamabad being taken off at times. However, given some of the activists' experience with disaster relief communications, many groups knew that SMS couldn't be censored since Pakistan's Telecoms Authority generally use cheap mobile jamming devices which had proven ineffective in the past.

In spite of fears that the internet may be taken offline in the weeks ahead, this hasn't happened in Pakistan yet, although there are growing concerns over the clampdown of independent media in Pakistan.

Now a coalition of various non-profit organizations, left-wing political parties, NGOs and human rights organizations, labour and trade-union federations, academics, students, and concerned citizens has formed as an umbrella group to resist the 'emergency' in Pakistan.

Texting Options

They have decided to deploy SMS to aid efforts in getting a two-way information flow from reliable sources embedded in various locations to the others in the country and those concerned overseas. The intention was for the information to feed into and from international sources, such as student-organized peace rallies and movements in places such as the US and the UK, as well as collect messages of support from leaders of parties.

Without access to print or traditional broadcast media, the groups have turned to text messaging. Not only is SMS accessible by citizens in Pakistan, it also provides a channel to report and provide information to others overseas.

The groups evaluated various SMS broadcasting techniques and solutions based on a core need of anonymous, reliable messaging. They primarily had to ensure that identities would not be revealed to the telecoms authority.

Four options were discussed. SMPP would likely be shut down after the first broadcast since all operators in Pakistan have LI (Lawful Interception) set up and housed at the premises of ISI, Pakistan's Intelligence Agency. The second option was to use SMPP based connectivity to a foreign operator. A third option was an API provided by a local operator but, again, as soon as the LI started monitoring suspicious activity, it would have been shut down.

Shifting Locations

The final option considerd was SIM-based SMS, which is where FrontlineSMS came into play. The groups decided that using a cellular phone connected to a PC was the most anonymous and rapidly deployable solution available to them. One downside – that the location of the hub may be pinpointed using triangulation – could be mitigated by shifting locations, or even using a laptop and driving around when broadcasting SMS alerts and related communications.

Ken Banks, founder of kiwanja.net that developed FrontlineSMS said that "At present the groups have a global instance of FrontlineSMS set up to collect messages broadcast out of the country, and are setting up a number of satellite hubs in Pakistan itself to allow messages to be returned."

The use of FrontlineSMS in Pakistan builds on increasing interest in the software from the human rights and activist communities. As is often the case in these situations, rapidly deployable, scalable solutions are often the most appropriate.

FrontlineSMS, which is currently undergoing further development at Stanford University, has attracted considerable interest from the human rights field and will form part of the discussions during the forthcoming New Tactics in Human Rights online workshop from November 28 to

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had strenuously requested that the security police write an accurate report of the incident that had occurred

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

December 4th.

kiwanja.net is currently running a competition for grassroots NGOs and co-sponsored by 160Characters among others that is open until 14th December 2007. Details here: NGOmobile

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Related article: Pakistan Turns To SMS For News 08 Nov 2007

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