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Author / organisation	The Bivings Report
Year recorded	2007
Region	Asia-Pacific · India
Category	Governance/political
Original source	bivingsreport.com
Archive page	kiwanja.net/mobile-database/sms-action/

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SMS For Action

Posted on March 30th, 2006
By Rita Desai in Other, Technology, Marketing, Media, Tools, Public Affairs

Recently, NPR's Story of the Day podcast (Empowered by Technology, Indians Fight Government Corruption) featured how SMS technology effectively gave middle class Indians the ability to launch large scale protests against a legal system that is notorious for protecting the interests of the elite class. Fashion model Jessica Lal was shot and killed at an exclusive nightclub/bar in Dehli nearly 7 years ago, allegedly by Manu Sharma, the son of a wealthy Indian politician. A month ago, Sharma was acquitted of all charges after evidence related to the case mysteriously disappeared. Witnesses became uncooperative. The acquittal came on the official basis of insufficient evidence. It is believed that bribery and corruption were key to the outcome of this case.

India's middle class was largely angered by this latest demonstration of the Indian legal system's incompetence. As a response to the verdict, Indian news broadcast station NDTV launched a "Justice for Jessica" protest campaign and asked their viewers (mostly composed of middle class citizens with cell phones) to text in their signatures for a petition to reopen the Jessica Lal murder case. According to NDTV broadcast journalist Barkha Dutt, the lines were open for only 3 days but the yielded over 200,000 messages in support of the campaign. All responses were registered as votes. An impromptu rally was also held in the capital after students text messaged each other of their plans and forwarded this new age call to action to their friends. Again, there was an unbelievable turnout. The NDTV petition was forward to India's most influential political leaders and the case has since been re-opened, with support for Jessica coming from political elites such as Sonia Gandhi, as well as the prime minister and the president.

Recently, I attended an Internet Advocacy Center luncheon, where a young man from a non-profit group expressed his frustration at not being able to mobilize individuals that were on his email list to turn out for rallies or become more active with his group's campaign. SMS-based tactics would be an appropriate remedy for those seeking to charge their campaign with supporter involvement. The US is just getting on board with using SMS technology for major campaigns, as cell phone users have largely ignored this service or just used it for personal message delivery. In Asia, SMS-based services like iMode began flourishing more than three years ago. Though the US market has gained quite a lot of momentum in this category, advocacy groups and non-profits are typically slow to catch onto integrating new media possibilities into their campaigns, unlike consumer marketers. Arguable, a coalition group/issue campaign use of text messaging/SMS as a call to action (e.g. RALLY AT DUPONT CIRCLE 2PM 4/3) is a far more interesting, engaging and relevant use of this technology and far better than letting consumer marketers update you on your cell phone about the launch of a new flavor of toothpaste.

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1. *Jikomboe » Simu Za Mkono Na Mabadiliko Chanya Ya Jamii*

   February 17th, 2007 at 2:52 pm

Comments

1. *fgb*

   March 30th, 2006 at 3:24 pm

   Good post. Howard Rheingold writes about this here.

2. *Alex Clover*

   March 30th, 2006 at 6:41 pm

   I'm not sure of other examples of the widespread use of SMS for politically-motivated purposes, but organizers of protests all over Spain in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings used SMS extremely effectively as a means of viral communication. There is widespread evidence that SMS was the principle method for mass organization across the country — just google "train bomb march 11″ or something along those lines. And if you're sceptical of the reports available, just ask someone who, like yours truly, was in Spain at the time, now over 2 years ago. I'm sure you'll find that most people somehow did get involved through SMS.

   SMS is a very effective way of viral communication in Europe in general — but almost always between friends. A modern-day U.S. comparison could be made with blogs that are more friend-oriented. The power of viral communication within these groups is certainly great, as the message extends across tight-knit social networking clusters where trust between members of the network is extremely high.

   If a strong political reaction were to be spreading across blogs in this manner, I would certainly find that feasible, but then that would trounce any reason to use SMS within this group as the group is highly likely to be engaged on the internet anyway.

   I have my doubts as to whether leveraging this kind of networking power on any level aside from a purely grassroots one would be very effective without there being a strong psychological precedent for people to communicate strong emotions over SMS. In the US practically no one uses SMS — can anyone really envision people getting used to the SMSing in order to communicate virally? This is a tremendous impediment to the whole idea. Surely the links in any potential SMS viral network would have to first be familiar and comfortable with SMS for it to work.

   Even in Europe, however, I would only imagine a message would spread effectively across very tight-knit social groups — I see it unlikely that an outside political element would be able to effectively leverage this sort of grassroots power unless they are somehow strongly connected to a

grassroots movement to begin with.

3. *Alex Clover*

   March 30th, 2006 at 6:44 pm

   Actually, you would have to include "SMS" in the Google search mentioned in my previous comment!

4. *Rita Desai*

   March 30th, 2006 at 8:13 pm

   Alex,

   In reponse to your first comment, the reason SMS is a better tool than, say, a blog, is because a cellphone is on your person and an SMS text message is more portable than a blog or email message. It is easier to send messages about impromptu gatherings because it's easier to push information via SMS to a selected interest group that is on the move and active who may require a reminder closer to the event or are likely to engage in spur of the moment activity. A person is more likely to be near their cellphone than to log into their email the minute you want them to.

   Finally, the point of the post is that though SMS is typically used for personal matters, if one is motivated enough to sign up for an email alert/blast or SMS alerts, or be called to action using SMS (like in the Justice for Jessica case), they are likely to be interested in the cause in the first place. Obviously, with most marketing activities, you would cater to a targeted audience of people who are interested in this cause and spur them to action.

   Thanks,
   Rita

   PS I suggest you look at Gary's comment and follow his link to Smart Mob, where Rheingold talks about how text messaging applications aided in the organization of the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle. This is the American application you are looking for. This has been done and it has been amazingly effective, not just in India, but also in the United States.

5. *Todd Zeigler*

   March 30th, 2006 at 9:32 pm

   For what its worth, both parties used texting pretty heavily last election day. This story shows that the Dems sent one million texts before election day trying to mobilize supporters to get to the polls.

6. *Alex Clover*

   March 30th, 2006 at 11:20 pm

   I'm not saying your point is not valid, but am basically suggesting that the true power of SMS may lie more in finding ways to encourage people to make text messages spread virally rather than in its use as a basic alert system of sorts or a type of voting system. Both have of course been used effectively before. But I'm not sure how one would make text messages spread virally this happen given poor usage of SMS in the US, and not sure if this is even possible on a grand scale without somehow connecting on a very grassroots level to the close-knit social circles of SMS to begin with. (Then again one could argue that an SMS social structure is not close-knit if its usage is poor.) This is all an invitation for discussion.

   The viral potential seems to be similar on "friend" blogs like MSN Spaces or Live Journal due to their close-knit social structure, which is arguably similarly close to that of well-used SMS networks. It would be interesting to study recent examples of viral political marketing across friend blogs, if any notable examples exist at this time. This is also an invitation for discussion or perhaps for a future post with your further thoughts.

   Alex

7. *Rita Desai*

   March 31st, 2006 at 12:10 am

   Alex,

   Your assumption that text messaging is not popular or poor in the United States is incorrect. If you look at the market for new services, it has been a breakout year for mobile messaging in this country. Also, I found this article from one year ago that might give you an idea of what the market looks like here. Remember, it's on an upswing and there is no news of it from market researchers or industry analysts that it will be in decline anytime soon.

   SMS may not be popular with aging Baby Boomers, but our Echo generation has introduced a need in the market for products like the T Mobile Sidekick and cellular plans that increase the monthly text message allowance. The Echo generation, which has grown up alongside a constant stream of technological innovation, is also very involved and engaged with political and social causes. You needn't look any further than our college and university campuses for proof of that. But, just to be sure, I hyperlinked some articles in for you.

   Thanks,
   Rita

8. *fgb*

   March 31st, 2006 at 12:47 pm

   One wonders how the pro-immigrant protests that have taken place, and still do, across the country were organized. In LA, some were organized via Spanish-language radio, others door-to-door by school kids. I've not looked at this in depth, but wonder what other tactics were used: email, myspace.com, SMS, etc.

9. *Katrin*

   September 26th, 2006 at 12:34 pm

Wow, I had no idea, Rita, you are talking aout all this here! Thanks for the pointer - check us out at www.mobileactive.org where we are tracking stories about mobile phones in civil society. We are about to come out with a five-part series of Strategy Guides (with support from the Surdna Foundation) that will go into detail about how mobile phones are used in advocacy, elections and getting out the vote, disaster relief, fundraising, and other civil society applications. Stay tuned to www.mobielactive.org and thanks for this conversation (which I come to five months late

Katrin
www.nten.org
and www.mobileactive.org

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