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TEXT MESSAGE DIVE

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WIRELESS : Rural South Africans dive into text messaging

By Robyn Curnow Published: MONDAY, DECEMBER 6, 2004

'Sawubona! Unjani?" is less snappy than "How r u?" but the text message means the same thing in Zulu.

For Southern Africa's rural populations, SMS, for short message service, is allowing people to communicate like never before.

In some isolated parts of KwaZulu-Natal Province in South Africa, the distinctive towers of mobile phone masts are now as much part of the scenery as the rolling green hills and endless blue sky. Cellular networks cover 90 percent of the country, connecting far more people than the scarce land-line system.

The numbers are telling. There are about 43 million people living in South Africa and only 4.7 million have access to a fixed-line telephone. MTN, one of the three mobile networks, estimates there are 18.4 million mobile phone owners, or 41 percent of the population, in South Africa. By 2010, MTN projects about 33 million people, or 77 percent of the current population, will have mobile phones.

Cellphone technology has not only got South Africans talking, it has also got them texting.

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Portia Maurice, the corporate communications general manager at MTN, estimates that a South African mobile phone user sends 17 text messages a day, compared with the four texts a European sends on a daily basis.

Low costs are the main attraction for South Africans. For MTN's prepaid customers, an SMS can cost as little as 35 South African cents, or 6 U.S. cents, a message. By comparison, the cheapest voice call rate is 95 cents a minute.

"SMS usage is growing," Maurice said by telephone. "For us, it is an important source of growth going forward." This rising use of cellphones and text messaging is echoed across the continent. Africa is the world's fast-growing market for mobile communications, according to the International Telecommunication Union. Not surprising when it is easier to get a prepaid mobile phone contract than a bank account.

In Africa, mobile phones are more common than credit cards. I have seen former child soldiers in Mozambique and wizened village chiefs in Zululand use their mobile phones with glee.

Text messaging not only keeps Africans in touch with one another but it is also helping to save lives.

In Gugulethu, near Cape Town, an experimental SMS-based software program called Cell-Life is being used to help administer antiretroviral drugs to people with HIV/AIDS. Two doctors and one nurse keep in contact with one another and their 500 patients via text messages sent from local counselors.

"Text messages support a network of home based care," Samira Anand, technical development manager at Cell-Life, said in a telephone interview. Gugulethu-based counselors visit the patients, monitor their condition and text back updates to a central database. "The doctors don't get to see as many patients as they would like," Anand said. "This allows them to pinpoint patients who aren't doing well. And, of course, monitor those patients that are benefiting from drug therapy."

A group African women's rights advocates are urging women to use their mobile phones to sign an online petition. By sending an SMS message, women can support a campaign urging African governments to ratify an African Union protocol on women's rights.

Even the Nelson Mandela Foundation has gone digital. South African mobile phone users can pledge support to the foundation by texting 46664, Mandela's prison number on Robben Island. Each text costs 20 rand, and the proceeds go toward Mandela's development projects.

The large continental network of mobile phone users is also benefiting companies, many of which find they can cut costs and single out customers directly if they use text messages rather than phone or mail them.

Escaping the text message in Southern Africa, it seems, is nigh impossible. If you are late returning your rental DVD or video, the local video store texts you a reminder. If you have rented a car, the rental company texts you the final bill before deducting the amount from your credit card. All within minutes of returning the car and handing over the keys.

Banks notify account holders by text message when a deposit or withdrawal is made into or from their account. The E-Block Watch service informs people in certain areas about criminal acts so that the whole community can be on the lookout for culprits.

With their mobile phones, a growing number Africans are finding their voices. In Zulu, "siyakhuluma" means "we are talking." They're also texting.

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