

EDITORIAL FOR COMPUTING SA

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SMS messaging bridges South Africa's digital donga

The high adoption rates of cellphones in South Africa, especially among lower LSM consumers, have given a new impetus to initiatives aimed at bridging the digital divide. This has made possible the development of programmes that focus on using SMS messaging as a communications tool in South Africa's economically vulnerable and underserved areas. In many digital divide initiatives, irrespective of whether they are market or development led, SMS is fast becoming a preferred digital bridge across the donga to information access.

The digital donga, the way of speaking about the digital divide in the African context, refers to the separation of those who effectively use information and communication technologies (ICTs) in their daily lives and those in disadvantaged communities who do not have access to those ICTs.

"I am of the opinion that advancing the use of SMS messaging will go far in lowering the barriers of access to information for people in disadvantaged communities and contribute to improving the quality of their lives. The local messaging industry needs to see its role as developmental in addressing the digital divide by calling for the extension of the Internet e-rate to SMS messaging," says Dr Pieter Streicher, managing director of BulkSMS.com.

Cost of telecommunications, whether fixed or mobile, remains a barrier to entry into the digital era for many South Africans. The lost opportunity, according to Bridges.org, is that "for the information 'have-nots' to use ICT to improve their lives" since ICTs have become "increasingly a foundation of our societies and economies, the digital divide means that the information "have-nots" are denied the option to participate in new ICT-based jobs, e-government, ICT-improved healthcare, and ICT-enhanced education."

For over a decade there have been concerted efforts by government, business and the NGO sector to bridge the digital divide in South Africa. The first wave of digital divide programmes was aimed at providing poor people in underserved areas with access to computers and the Internet. Many of these multi-purpose community centres required large private and public sector investments and buy-in from the local community prior to addressing the need for technology skills training. Other laudable programmes such as the Smart Cape Access Project, while using municipal libraries as public access points, have not been able to fully meet user demand for computer, email and Internet access due to infrastructure and connectivity constraints.

More recently, a second wave of digital divide programmes have begun to focus on mobile technologies. According to Katrin Verclas of MobileActive.org, an NGO promoting the social and economic development potential of cellphones, "mobile phones are the easiest and least expensive medium to communicate and are far more pervasive than the Internet. Mobile phones are also bridging the digital divide in developing countries at a rate much faster than most other interventions to date."

These mobile focused digital divide programmes have been encouraged by unparalleled cellular adoption rates. A recent [study](#) by IE MarketResearch.com forecasted that cellphone subscribers in South Africa will grow from 42.2 million in 2007 to 48.5 million, an increase in mobile penetration within the population from 88.5% to 94.8%.

"With a positive outlook for cellphone penetration rates still predicted for South Africa, it makes good sense to implement initiatives that focus on a widely adopted wireless technology that is easy to use when sharing information. SMS messaging provides an unparalleled opportunity to act as a digital bridge

to provide access to information at a lower cost and within near instantaneous rates of delivery,” says Dr Streicher.

For example, a development programme run by the Greater Tzaneen Municipality use bulk SMS messaging to coordinate meeting and events among youth in underserviced, poor, rural communities in the area. A community liaison officer at the local authority sends an SMS message from a messaging application loaded on his Internet-enabled computer to each youth coordinator responsible to communicate notification or reminder messages within their village. On receiving the SMS on their cellphone, the youth coordinators then broadcast the message within his or her constituency. The municipality has found that their SMS messaging communications strategy has reduced their telecommunications costs, increased staff productivity by minimising the administration surrounding the setting up of meetings, and increased attendance at youth meetings and events.

“The Greater Tzaneen Municipality use of SMS messaging shows that communications can bridge the digital divide even when not all youths have access to a cellphone. Rather, by coordinating technology and people in each local community, the municipality is able to ensure that important youth development programme information is communicated to their intended audience,” concludes Dr Streicher.

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About BulkSMS.com

BulkSMS.com, a division of Celerity Systems (Pty) Ltd, has been in operation since 2000 and is headquartered in Cape Town, South Africa. BulkSMS is a leading wireless application service provider offering bulk SMS messaging solutions to large and small businesses, public benefit organisations, and individuals. BulkSMS.com has a global market presence, including Europe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. To further an organisation’s SMS communication needs, BulkSMS offers two-way bulk SMS messaging, premium rate solutions and supports mobile marketing campaigns. BulkSMS flagship messaging solution is the BulkSMS Text Messenger, a desktop application. BulkSMS is a member of the Wireless Application Service Provider Association (WASPA).

For more information on BulkSMS’s commercial messaging services visit www.bulksms.co.za and for details on BulkSMS’s messaging service offering discounted bulk SMS message prices for public benefit organisations (such as schools, NGOs and faith-based organisations) visit <http://community.bulksms.com>. For direct enquiries email info@bulksms.com or contact BulkSMS telephonically on +27-21-552 6321.