Mobilising mobile

Cellphones by themselves are a very weak tool, but they can be used to link callers to empowering people and organisations, reducing the isolation that increases victimisation says Peter Benjamin.

There are 180 companies providing data services over the mobile network, known as wireless application service providers (Wasps). While there is a great deal of creativity in offering money-making services to download pictures of stars, music ringtones, pornography, love tips and the other games, gimmicks and gadgets, there are surprisingly few projects exploring how this amazing technology can be used for social benefit. Cell-Life is running a three-year project, funded by the Vodacom Foundation and the RAITH Foundation to do just this.

This project will explore how a range of cellphone services can provide information and communication services that are useful to people infected or affected by HIV. This includes subscription services for people infected or affected; public information by interactive SMS; social marketing using cellphones as a form of mass media that can be interactive and targeted; internal organisational services for HIV organisations (such as TAC and Soul City); ways of linking patients and health providers; ways of supporting self-expression and self-help for affected people; and supporting monitoring and evaluation of the pandemic.

A range of technologies are useful. SMS will definitely be used, as will the chat-type systems (such as Mxit using GPRS). We will experiment with push to voicemail, cellphone games, video and more. An open source server system is being developed to deliver this.

Social usage is more important than the technology – how can we use the tool of cellphones to support the self-organisation, treatment, education and action of the HIV-affected community? We will endeavour to make the system free to the end-user, or as cheap as possible (for example, people can request services via free Please Call Me messages, and then receive information through a voicemail which doesn’t require literacy), and information will be in different South African languages.

The project is new and we are learning what is possible. Cellphones seem to be useful in providing information when people want it (such as the address details of service providers), but is very weak at changing behaviour.

Technology is a passive tool that reflects the dominant interests of the society. For the first time, literally a majority of people have an interactive digital means of receiving and sending information. As a society, do we want to use this staggering potential to receive advertising, horoscopes, ringtones, game shows and porn? Or can we find ways to use mobile to mobilise against the real challenges we face?

Endnotes