

Tools for Connecting People

Presenter: Christopher Fabian, UNICEF

Christopher Fabian began by showing the participants a video of the Innovation Sections latest project to be launched in New York on the 6th December, 2007. The Project is entitled “Our Stories” and aims to get 5 million online, SMS-sent stories by 2010. The project has been developed in conjunction with Google.

The Innovations section of UNICEF was begun 9 months ago. One of the main issues it has been tackling with is how to connect those without access to a computer with those that do. UNICEF turned to cell phones and radio’s as an option to bridge this divide as they are proven to have a growing rate of access- with 90% of the developing world having access to a cell phone by 2010 and 9 out of 10 people in the developing world having access to a radio.

WIKI technology was also seen as a means of better connecting with children and young people. The UNIWIKI approach encompasses an “open source philosophy” so that young people can be given a voice and so that the “pulse” of the community can be better captured and understood.

UNIWIKI acts as a database connector and the holding point for information sent in via SMS. The core use began with addressing the needs of people who needed information. Someone needing information would SMS in to request for information on a particular event or circumstance, UNIWIKI would then call back with an audio answer while putting out the query to all of those who have signed up for alerts. They can then call in to leave an audio reply.

UNIWIKI has now been taken to a new level, serving not just the needs of young people, UN workers and journalists but also providing an opportunity for agencies like UNICEF to initiate projects such as the soon to be launched “Our Stories”.

Other recent IT developments are the use of USB sticks as radios. With ROSCO technology a laptop can be connected to the UNIWIKI system. ROSCO can pick up the radio story from the internet which is then transferred to an FM radio which then broadcasts the story.

Rapid SMS is another new project whereby someone can put up a form with questions online and then insert the mobile numbers of the people they want to answer the questionnaire. When they respond a graph is then created online which allows the questioner to gather data as quickly as possible. A final initiative still in its infancy and used by UNICEF is community mapping whereby people can note down the location of villages and relevant sites via SMS. This is then forwarded to UNIWIKI- this has been used for advocacy and to change geographic situations on the ground.

UNICEF has entered into partnerships with a number of websites such as TakingItGlobal and Mdialog to make UNIWIKI as incorporative as possible. UNICEF has worked with its regional websites to arrange that certain e-clubs feed directly into UNIWIKI space and has also arranged that during certain conferences (such as the recent Africa Ft for Children) their web-space is linked to UNIWIKI.

UNIWIKI is working on localising itself by making itself available in a number of languages.

Regarding the question of costs - all the equipment needed for accessing UNIWIKI is relatively cheap. However, the costs of cell phone and internet usage is still dependent on the local situation. It is hoped that local providers of both internet and air-time will subsidise the costs to make UNIWIKI more readily available for people in the developing world. Political problems are another hurdle when it comes to accessing UNIWIKI. The example of Ethiopia was cited where until recently there had been no SMS service available for over three years. After removal of the ban, UNICEF was given an FM frequency through which UNIWIKI radio transmissions could be broadcast.

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