

## **MOBILE PHILANTHROPY :**

### *Digital Telecommunications and the Greater Global Good*

On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2004, a devastating earthquake in the Indian Ocean generated a tsunami that quickly inundated seaports and low-lying villages in some of the most economically impoverished areas of the world. Resulting in hundreds-of-thousands of deaths, millions of people displaced and up to billions of dollars in obliterated infrastructure, what is now considered one of the most devastating natural catastrophes in modern history has also become a global philanthropic success story. According to international news sources, millions of dollars, euros, yen and pounds poured into hastily-assembled relief efforts within a matter of days; eleven million euros from Italy alone matched Australian efforts totaling over fifteen million dollars – all amassed within a week of the disaster. While the outpouring of assistance from a truly global community is impressive enough, what makes this act of international altruism particularly powerful is that it was largely organized and executed using the smallest, most ubiquitous of modern devices : the mobile phone.

The near-omnipresence and efficiency of digital mobile communications transform its devices into powerful tools for affecting social change through the ease by which its users can organize micro-donation schemes and collective action. By infusing market consumption with humanitarian aid, savvy non-profit entities and socially progressive mobile service providers are contributing to an emerging culture of “mobile philanthropy.” Recognizing a growing need (or rather, market) for innovative giving mechanisms, digital donation facilitators such as *M-Donate* and *The Wireless Giving Association* have sprung (not surprisingly during the most accelerated increase of world-wide mobile phone usage) to help charities and political groups mine the social

networks created by mobile telephony for fundraising opportunities. While recent tsunami efforts can now be used as an ideal (if not, the standard) for how digital communications can efficiently channel resources, it was not the first time such efforts were attempted. Indeed, research reveals that charitable giving mediated by short-message-services (SMS) existed as “early” as 2001.

With the ease of information sharing through digital communicative devices such as SMS (text-messaging) and MMS (multi-media message service), it is quickly conceivable how mobile phones can contribute to the mass-mobilization of its users and their resources. However, it is far less clear how this heavily-networked mode of communication affects our interactions with others – especially those whose very salvation seemed at one time entirely dependent on the dance of thumbs above miniscule keypads. Are we any more informed about global poverty, the daily ravages of starvation, the wide-spread urgency for sanitation or aware that true aide to tsunami victims requires a possibly decade-long commitment for social and structural resuscitation? Furthermore, are we any more apt to act on addressing these dire concerns now that a conscience-driven hunger to help mankind is quickly satiated by the press of the “send” button?

While I cannot argue that a single dollar-per-text campaign is equal in direct affect to frontline disaster relief nor multilateral state-based assistance, SMS fundraising does present an act of considerable, collective political will. Recalling Robert Putnam’s lament over modern society’s increasing civic disengagement (and consequent dilution of broad social ties and a community’s collective social capital), it appears that mobile telephony – through its ubiquity and consequent social network – offers a possible countermeasure.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Mark Granovetter’s seminal thesis on the power of weak ties, mobile philanthropy offers opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003) p.48

for civic engagement through a dual system of strong interpersonal relationships and peripheral membership in wide-spread organizational systems.<sup>2</sup> Mobile-based involvement in networks beyond immediate kinships provides access to disaster volunteer opportunities, thereby recovering a sense of social capital predicated on detached but nonetheless effective altruistic endeavors.

### **MOBILE PHILANTHROPY : AN OVERVIEW**

France, Australia and the United Arab Emirates. Nextel, T-Mobil and Telefonica. Croix-Rouge, Breast Cancer and UNICEF. In addressing social ills and the devastation of natural disaster, these otherwise disparate entities (countries, mobile service providers and charities) have become increasingly interconnected through the growing popular practice of mobile-mediated civic action. In a world of pre and post tsunami donor fatigue, creative solutions which harness a user's impulse to contribute *while* consuming have become both a major fiduciary pursuit for non-profits and a booming brand-building exercise for big business. While innovations certainly abound, there does arise at least four standards for mobile contributing: direct-donation SMS, accessory purchase, surcharge reimbursement and social mobilization.

What each service provides are simple yet far-reaching mechanisms (such as SMS fund transfers) and products (such as ring tones) that cultivate single-unit micro-donations from impulse-driven consumers; when mini-funds from millions of on-the-spot text-donors are combined, one or two pesos and euros rise to multi-zeroed amounts, channeling the old adage that one drop can cause a tidal wave (no pun intended). Furthermore, with even a cursory glance through the following examples of mobile-giving pioneers, one immediately notices the global

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties" from *Sociological Theory*, Volume 1 (1983), p.2

reach of mobile philanthropy; although communities can devise home-grown schemes to tackle indigenous circumstances, the global network of SMS giving can bring both resources and political will to what is increasingly becoming *everyone's* global village.

***SMS Direct Account Donation :***

- 1) The marketing materials for the Wireless Giving Association (based in Atlanta, Georgia) describe their wireless software Mobile Giving™ as a way to seamlessly facilitate impulse giving by addressing ease of use and convenient billing. Like all SMS-based direct donations, Wireless Giving offers a specified short code attached to a pre-authorized charity selected by the user to which she can text-message her contribution at any time. All donations are immediately routed to the contributor's mobile phone bill, payment of which forwards the designated amount to the charity with a responding thank-you message confirming that the tax-deductible donation had been sent to the contributor.<sup>3</sup>
  
- 2) In March, 2005, London-based mobile marketing group MindMatics launched the first text donation campaign for Breast Cancer Care. Taking advantage of the popularity of SMS, Marcus O'Shea, head of fundraising, said “giving people the opportunity to donate to us using their mobile phone is an ideal way for us to do this and we are confident that our campaign will be a great success.”<sup>4</sup>
  
- 3) Coinciding with the Holy month of Ramadan, an ambitious SMS-based campaign was launched in Dubai to aid local charities such as Al Noor, Rashid Paediatric Centre and

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<sup>3</sup> [www.wirelessgivingassociation.com](http://www.wirelessgivingassociation.com) (05/ 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Julia Pearlman, *Breast Cancer Care launches first SMS donation service*, Brand Republic Digital Bulletin, 15 Mar, 2005

Sharjah Charity International. “For a long time charities have been seeking a way to attract micro-donations by a simple, fast and effective method and this is exactly what Mobile-Aid will offer,” said Tariq Qureishy, the businessman behind Mobile-Aid, a non-profit making organization that lends its services and technology completely free of charge to registered charities in the Emirates.<sup>5</sup>

- 4) Shortly after the tsunami hit the shores of South East Asia, Czechoslovakia’s Donor’s Forum partnered with the country’s mobile carriers to launch a major text-mediated appeal to benefit the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) of the Czech republic; the agency received over 500,000 texts messages and a subsequent three-quarters of a million dollars in aid. According to ADRA’s president, Vitezslav Wurst, “text messaging has the potential to revolutionize how charities fundraise. But the campaign has to be planned carefully... the media have to be partners because without any publicity... you end up only addressing a small group of people and that's the end of the effort. The next group that helped us a lot was all the Internet servers that displayed our banner on their Internet pages.” Noting the need for cross-media marketing (Internet and broadcast), Wurst’s comments embody the community building that these projects enable.<sup>6</sup>
- 5) The Greeks employed similar tactics when viewers of Public Television donated more than 16 million Euros for the victims of the tsunami during a two-day tele-marathon.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anne-Birte Stensgaard, *'Mobile-Aid' launched in the UAE*, AME Info, 12 November, 2003

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/006619.htm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/006780.htm>

- 6) In a heartwarming effort to infuse the deluge of digital donations with a more empathic sentiment, Malaysia's "From the Heart" campaign collected messages like, "Karma said good things come after bad things goes" to accompany funds sent to The Star Earthquake Tsunami Relief Fund.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, funds reaching into the high millions have been mobilized through simple text messaging towards charitable endeavors across the world. Efforts continue today in places as diverse as Germany, Spain, Singapore, Pakistan, Australia, South Africa and the United States.

#### *Accessory and Service Donations :*

Applying the tenants of social marketing (defined by the Social Marketing Institute as "the use of commercial marketing concepts and tools in programs designed to influence individuals' behavior to improve their well being and that of society"),<sup>9</sup> several telecommunications companies have aligned with non-profit organizations in quintessential forms of public-private partnerships. Private industries are likely driven towards charitable work by both genuine altruism and a savvy eye for innovative public relations vehicles. However, brand building through humanitarian work still strengthens the brand; and with funds pouring in through previously untapped channels, charities are far better enabled by it:

- 1) The designation of charity ring tones and wallpapers appears to be the most popular way for mobile content providers to encourage customers to raise funds while continuing to purchase products and services. In January, 2005, Leap Wireless International, Inc. offered its Cricket Clicks(TM) FunMail(TM) customers the opportunity to contribute to

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/006591.htm>

<sup>9</sup> [www.social-marketing.org](http://www.social-marketing.org)

tsunami relief efforts by purchasing and downloading dedicated tsunami relief wallpapers to their mobile phones via FunMail's Wallpaper Universe 2.0 application. In the same month, Boost Mobile, Nextel Communications Inc.'s youth lifestyle brand, encouraged American youth participation by offering a catalog of mobile phone ring tones dedicated to the United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF). Similar donation schemes were provided by Bell Canada and Zaptop phones. Also, an online group known as Charity Rings announced, "buying your ringtones, wallpapers, games etc. at Charity Rings means that you pay the same or similar prices as other web sites. However with Charity Rings you help charities to help others at the same time! Our content teams ensure that we always have the latest and coolest content."<sup>10</sup>

2) After ring tones, other companies donated large amounts of funds gleaned from corporate profits. MobiMate(R), a leading provider of business and travel management applications for mobile devices, donated corporate revenue from the January 2005 licensing sales of its popular DateMate and WorldMate software to UNICEF and IsraAID. In the same season, Handmark(R), another mobile software developer, announced it will donate all first-month proceeds from new Pocket Express(R) subscriptions to the International Red Cross. Shortly thereafter, Motricity, provider of mobile content and solutions, committed 100% of all proceeds from selected software titles purchased through January 31st at PalmGear.com to the tsunami relief fund.<sup>11</sup>

3) As early as the Australian summer of 2001, national telecommunications company Telstra offered its clients a Red Nose logo sent directly to their mobile phone screens. For

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<sup>10</sup> [http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat\\_sms\\_and\\_charities.htm](http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat_sms_and_charities.htm)

<sup>11</sup> Business Wire January 26, 2005, Wednesday 12:00 PM GMT

each logo, Telstra donated micro-funds to the Australian Sudden Infant Death Syndrome organization. By ordering the logo via SMS, Telstra customers donated about \$10,000 Australian to research.<sup>12</sup>

- 4) Illustrating the potential for the cell phone to educate, in December, 2003, a partnership between Vodafone and Fauna and Flora International (the world's longest established international conservation body), yielded a conservation- awareness building series of mobile content call WildLive! According to Vodafone, “customers [were] able to download high-quality wildlife and landscape images, ring-tones of the calls of endangered and protected species as well as entering competitions and quizzes, [received] news alerts, and [got] in touch with others who share their interest.”<sup>13</sup>
- 5) In December, 2004, the United Kingdom witnessed the largest snowball fight in history, albeit on their mobile phones. A brainchild of Andrew J. Scott, creator of the [playtxt.net](http://playtxt.net) mobile social network, Snow Ball Wars allowed users to send SMS text or animated MMS "snowballs" at friends and family. The unsuspecting target receiving the message had to then login on [SnowBallWars.com](http://SnowBallWars.com) to read the private message. Users were charged nominal amounts after their free 5 “snowballs” were exhausted. The profits from over 100,000 SMS and MMS snowballs were given to the National Association for Prevention of Cruelty to Children.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/000045.htm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/002571.htm>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/006483.htm>

### ***Surcharge Rebates and Donations :***

Amidst the flurry of SMS activities, there were growing worries that consequent surcharges and value added taxes (VATs) would not only siphon funds from charities to bureaucracy, but also inhibit consumers from what is otherwise a very easy and inexpensive way to contribute. To combat this concern, several governments and mobile operators waived charges and fees for calls and text messages either made during a specific calendar window, or for a pre-specified purpose.

Following word that SMS donations were subject to charges levied by cellular services providers, Malaysian Airtime Media Productions assured donors that the company would make up the difference during its tsunami relief campaign. In Czechoslovakia, Finance Minister Bohuslav Sobotka agreed with using the revenues from VAT on SMS messages sent by Czechs for tsunami aid, saying during a press conference that “the SMS campaign is very important. It’s a very easy way of donating money. The popularity of SMS donations is increasing since the system was used when floods devastated the country in 2002.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***Social Mobilizing :***

Mobile philanthropy derives its efficacy from the far reaching social networks that mobile technology creates and sustains. Recognizing its potential, several organizations have devised advocacy programs to effectively *mobilize* the mobile. New Consumer magazine, Britain’s fair-trade publication, is currently working to collect 1 million digital signatures as part of an SMS petition urging world leaders to discuss fair trade at the next G8 summit. While the

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat\\_sms\\_and\\_charities.htm](http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/cat_sms_and_charities.htm)

target can be considered ambitious, Editor-in-chief Mel Young hopes that the "quick, easy and instant" nature of text messages will make the target attainable.<sup>16</sup>

In the Netherlands, Amnesty International uses premium text messaging as both a fundraising tool and an action mechanism for covering campaign costs. By signing up online and giving their mobile number, participants in their campaigns receive "action" SMS messages every two weeks, which is then invoiced directly to their phone bill. For example, an affirmative reply to a recent SMS "action alert" concerning the plight of an abducted Guatemalan boy added the user's digital signature to an Amnesty petition urging the Guatemala government to releasing the 16 year old. In keeping actions and responses digital, the campaign not only pays for itself but is also a clever and personalized way of keeping Amnesty's members informed of their efforts while allowing them to be active participants in a cause they believe in. Doing so recovers an appreciation for civic engagement that is often lost in the social milieu of mobile telephony.<sup>17</sup>

## **MOBILE PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

"We are Generation Txt" was a widely-circulated text message in the Philippines and described by Howard Rheingold in *Smart Mobs* to discuss how a people can express a collective political will through ubiquitous network devices to affect significant social change.<sup>18</sup> Within four days in January 2001, over one million black-clad citizens, recruited en-masse through SMS and email, gathered at the site of the historic 1986 Pilipino "People Power" Revolution, ultimately toppling a corrupt regime (again) and birthing a digital reincarnation of non-violent protest. In describing mobile phone usage in the Pacific archipelago, Vincente Rafael notes that,

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/002571.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.textually.org/textually/archives/000551.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books Group, 2002) p.20

“cell phone users themselves [become] broadcasters, receiving and transmitting both news and gossip...[bringing] a new kind of crowd about, one that was thoroughly conscious of itself as a movement headed towards a common goal.”<sup>19</sup>

Harnessing the power of Rheingold’s smart mobs, mobile philanthropy allows the consumer to assist and thereby affect society through social networks strengthened by devices which enable “*individualized* electronically mediated interaction.”<sup>20</sup> Ironically, the strength of these networks lies not in the immediate relationships which comprise the majority of the device’s use, but in the “weak ties” beyond closely-familiar kinships. Mark Granovetter describes these weak ties as essential to the full development of both society and the individual, warning that:

“Individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends. This deprivation will not only insulate them from the latest ideas and fashions but may put them in a disadvantaged position ... Furthermore, such individuals may be difficult to organize or integrate into political movements of any kind, since membership in movements or goal-oriented organizations typically results from being recruited by friends. While members of one or two cliques may be efficiently recruited, the problem is that, without weak ties, any momentum generated in this way does not spread beyond the clique. As a result, most of the population will be untouched.”<sup>21</sup>

The global ubiquity of media ensured that news of the tsunami, its dire affects and the myriad of opportunities to make a difference would hit news wires, broadcast stations, web logs and SMS networks within a matter of days, if not hours. This immediacy of information would not have its crucial cultural consequence if not for the vicarious, at times ephemeral weak-tie networks of email updates, news groups and opt-in alerts that predicate much of our activities on and off line.

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<sup>19</sup> Rheingold, p.157

<sup>20</sup> Richard Ling, *Where is mobile communication causing social change?* ([http://www.rheingold.com/texts/Ling\\_2004\\_Socialchange.htm](http://www.rheingold.com/texts/Ling_2004_Socialchange.htm)) p.1.2

<sup>21</sup> Granovetter, p.2

With the increasing convergence of media, communications and computing within the ever-growing capabilities of the mobile phone, such weak-tie networks become our action-alerts on the go, as illustrated by every example above of mobile-mediated civic action.

But is the rise of mobile philanthropy enough to recover and sustain the greater sense of communal interconnectedness that electronic media is generally accused of eroding?<sup>22</sup> Richard Ling posits that “the extremely personal nature of the device and the fact that it lowers the threshold for interaction means that social groups will likely use the device to strengthen already strong ties. Thus, the clique might not get information about various opportunities... since the network is too tightly bound.”<sup>23</sup> While mobile telephony certainly serves to sustain existing kinships, it does not sever the individual from the greater community of mobile users. Furthermore, the convergence within and constant inter-referencing of media (mobile-broadcast-internet) assures that mobile usage will never exist within a telecommunications vacuum; weak-ties are *strengthened* because mobile communications form only one part of our daily acquisition of information. However, what actions are generated by devices such as SMS and MMS will ensure that civic engagement (and therefore, social capital) is recovered when consumption is infused with charitable consequences.

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<sup>22</sup> Putnam, p.180

<sup>23</sup> Ling, Conclusion

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