



VIDEO BLOGGING// mcontent ←

YOU'VE BEEN FRAMED

WITH CONTENT SUPPLIERS PAYING TO POST CLIPS AND VIEWERS PAYING TO DOWNLOAD THEM, VIDEO BLOGGING LOOKS LIKE A WIN-WIN FOR OPERATORS. HOW TO MAKE A LONG-LASTING, MASS-MARKET, MOBILE BUSINESS CASE OUT OF SUCCESSFUL ONLINE SERVICES REMAINS THE GREATEST HURDLE.

//By Sean Jackson//

THE growth of web-logging and social network communities is well documented. Yet there is no universally accepted definition of video blogging. A blog, in essence, is a diary that is published on a dumbed down webpage. While social networks—such as Myspace—can be described as an inter-connection of dumbed down blogs. By extension then, mobile video blogging appears to be a dumbed down social network, accessible—at a cost, arguably, far outstripping its value—via a handheld device with a clunky input mechanism and a miniscule screen.

It sounds like a complete turkey. "I'm highly sceptical about blogging on mobile phones," says Fred Ghahramani, director of social network specialist AirG. "My take on mobiles is give it to me quick and give it to me slick. People aren't going to sit there writing their diaries on a phone. Just because something worked online, it doesn't mean it will work on the phone."

So why the sudden interest in mobile blogging? Well, for starters there's nothing at all sudden about the mobile community's interest in the blogosphere. One early example of a phoned-in blog is HiptopNation.com. The site was launched in 2002 by an early adopter of the Hiptop—a device which US software firm Danger created to enable user-friendly access to the mobile internet.

HiptopNation lets users upload photos taken with the Danger device, where they can be shared and commented upon by anyone who cares to surf by. Perhaps not surprisingly, the mo-blogging scene remained the preserve of the technorati. But when racy images of celebrity heiress Paris Hilton started doing the internet rounds in 2005 it was all thanks to her Hiptop, or rather her Sidekick as Hilton's carrier T-Mobile calls the device.

The device itself wasn't hacked, but apparently her website was. The site contained a variety of uploaded images taken using her handset and other stored personal data including Hilton's celebrity-packed address book. The nature of the hack is largely irrelevant though. The upshot of all this is that Hilton subsequently managed to fashion herself a career and video blogging received mass-market notoriety. >>



A FIRST GLANCE, ESTABLISHING AN ON-PORTAL COMMUNITY APPEARS TO GO AGAINST THE WIDELY ACCEPTED REASONS FOR THE SUCCESS OF NETWORKED COMMUNITIES



3G-only operator 3UK launched a service called SeeMeTV in October 2005. The service offers "cash for clips" and receives between 10,000 and 15,000 postings per month. Contributors receive a credit payment equivalent to roughly ten per cent of the download price. To date, the carrier has paid out over £250,000, which means it has earned £2.25m on downloads alone.

Its competitors have a begrudging admiration for SeeMeTV's achievements. However, the service does have its detractors, the most frequent criticism is that the majority of the content amounts to nothing more than cheap titillation.

"If you look at SeeMeTV the content that is downloaded is topless," says David Berney, managing director, Peekaboo TV. "That's where they are making money, that's where the downloads are coming from. What is important as a brand is that they don't want to offer something that just offers tits and arse."

A source close to the carrier told *MCI* that 80 per cent of the contributions go unused, since they are either of poor quality, boring or indecent. Surely, this was always going to be the case, and it raises the question how long can such a service last?

"These were absolutely the thoughts we went through when we first thought about the service," Martin Monteiro, head of user generated content, 3, told *MCI*. "The first people that put up clips tended to be the exhibitionists. But that died off fairly shortly."

According to Monteiro some users have worked out how to get published regularly, but the volume of submissions remains high, he warns: "You have to work out a way of wading through the ever increasing volume of content."

Following the initial success of SeeMeTV, 3 has since extended the service to include wallpapers and will shortly be extending it to include user generated ringtones. The carrier has also launched its own social network, Kink Kommunity, which has signed up over 50,000 paying subscribers since launch in July. The service receives on average 350,000 postings per day and generates 80,000 MMS submissions each month. 3's subscribers can opt for either a daily or monthly subscription at 20p and £1.49 respectively.

At first glance, establishing an on-portal community appears to go against the widely accepted reasons for the success of networked communities. "I think the operators certainly shouldn't be running these things because you end up siloing them and you end up potentially only having people networking within their own subscriber base. Obviously it doesn't make sense if people's friends and families aren't aligned by operator," says David Springall, CTO and co-founder, of the company that provides the technology for SeeMeTV, Yospace.

But keeping the walls up is exactly how MNOs test the water says Michal Zeevi Bender, director of product marketing at messaging firm Comverse's Email and Personal Information Division: "We're noticing the same behaviour as

with email, where operators are trying to set up their own communities. But users want access to other communities. Although, I think the operators are starting to realise that the communities can live side by side."

Things move slowly in operator land though. Throwing caution to the wind died shortly after the 3G licences were awarded. Being first to market is great if you strike it lucky but following a tried and tested success story is the preferred route to market for most. Activefone COO, Mark Watt, concurs: "Now, I'm not knocking these guys [SeeMeTV] because they were first to market. I wouldn't want to be first to market with anything. They've done a fantastic job in educating consumers. But it would take me a long time to find anything of interest other than girls flashing their boobs."

Still, what works for one carrier will usually work for another. The UK's number one carrier, O2, clearly decided that SeeMeTV was a great idea, because it launched its own cash for clips service called Look At Me in July 2006, again using the Yospace platform. It's unlikely that subscribers actively chose 3 because it offered SeeMeTV, cheap voice and texts is still the carrier's most potent subs winner. But the service remains a nice little earner, and Look At Me will probably be similarly successful.

Cashing in on a success story is an obvious strategy. Which begs the question why aren't more operators teaming up with existing communities? Peekaboo TV's Berney outlines an alternative route to market: "We go to publishing houses and TV companies at the moment and say 'you've got an audience and we've got infrastructure. So we can give you the infrastructure and manage it and you can promote it and brand it in your name.'"

Activefone's Watt suggests that linking up with established brands will help operators sell a wider variety of content. "If I'm a trainspotter and I see'd in a video of a train to any of these [UGC] sites, it won't ever get past the editor and go live because they'll just say, 'some lunatic has just sent me a picture of train,' it's not in their remit for content that will sell hundreds of thousands of downloads. However, if that could be uploaded to a specific site, like *Steam Railway Magazine*, it might be a hot piece of content."

Another company getting a lot of coverage in the off-portal space is Shozu. Launched in December 2005. Users register for free and then download the Shozu application (again for free). The service enables users upload images either to a Shozu account or to one of the listed partners. According to company CEO Mark Bole it works out 33 per cent cheaper than using MMS or mobile email, and unlike MMS there is no compression so the image is not altered in any way.

Bole reckons the operators need to forget trying to create a community: "The challenge for operators is that they feel they need to own their own community. Some have done it and found that they didn't take off. Trying to offer a one size fits all doesn't work. Why should you believe that you're part of a community because you all happen to pay the same company at the end of the month?"

All this off-portal talk is probably a bit scary for the operator community. Thankfully, Fastmobile CEO John Hoffman has some words of encouragement: "The carrier doesn't want to be a bit pipe. But any bit is a good story, even if it is not under their control. >>



BEING FIRST TO MARKET IS GREAT IF YOU STRIKE IT LUCKY BUT FOLLOWING A TRIED AND TESTED SUCCESS STORY IS THE PREFERRED ROUTE TO MARKET FOR MOST

They don't want to admit it, but they're damn sure happy to take the money. If I were a carrier I wouldn't want to be a bit pipe either, but I would want to encourage traffic. It's all about striking the right balance."

Converse's Zeevi Bender agrees: "We're seeing that a bucket-based approach to the mobile internet will drive service uptake. But the per transaction model generates more revenue. There is a balance to be struck. Additional functionality can be built around a service. With [Converse product] Lifelog we have a notification service built around mini-communities."

According to Shozu's Bole there is a very real risk that the operators will end up missing out. "They [the MNOs] need to be active, the walls are coming down. They need to ask 'how do I become a smart pipe?' There is a role for carriers."

Monetising blogging is clearly a major sticking point. Since the mobile world seems intent on trying to replicate the online world, perhaps it should replicate the business model and look towards advertising.

One firm that is ideally placed to comment on advertising is Blog TV, a mobile blogging spin-off from Israeli online social network Tapuz. CEO Gil Bul explains: "We do carry advertising, but only on the web, not the mobile. The viewing experience of the mobile is quite different in the sense that the viewing time on the web is much longer. We think that at the moment the business model for the mobile should be based on content consumption and not advertising. Of course this might change in the future."

"The challenge operators face is how do they get a piece of the action?" asks Pal Dolan, VP and general manager at Tellabs. "In the fixed environment the advertising market has transformed things. Not to say that once you start adding video to a phone then there is nothing to stop you advertising in that environment as well, by being much more targeted in terms of who you want to go after and in what markets."

Advertising is difficult for a number of reasons. With advertising on the web, there is usually a call to action. Users visit a site and sign up, the call to action opens a new window and the user can carry on what they were doing before. On a mobile, because of the user interface, the size of the screen, the navigability, the non-windowed environment, it would be quite complicated and tedious for most users to do that. It's unlikely that mobile internet users are going to be distracted from their browsing mission, or whatever they have chosen to do on their phone, to follow up on an advert.

Realistically, it's more about brand impression and awareness than it is about getting the user to do something or sign up for something. So that cuts the advertisers or sponsors down to a certain type, basically relatively large brands, which would then require a lot of convincing as to the efficacy of a mobile-based campaign.

There are some good reasons why kick starting an advertising-based model in the mobile space is going to take a longer than it did on the internet. Given the fact that people at the moment seem to be OK paying for content on mobile device, but totally not used to paying for anything on the internet.

However, Mobestar's marketing manager Nick Davis outlines a model where advertising could soon pay: "If you look at a dating service, you're paying to download someone's video profile, which is probably about 15-20 seconds long, and if there is a little trailer that plays before the content that says 'this profile is brought to you by...' that's fantastic, the advertiser is happy because they're reaching the right demographic, the user is happy because they're not paying the additional data charge on top of the download, and if someone is getting paid for having uploaded the clip they will be happy as well, so there will be an incentive to send in higher quality material."

Jim Braille, CEO and founder of Packet Video, adds: "We all know that there are only so many dollars available for advertising, but we also know that there are a lot of dollars available. Some is flowing away from traditional models, TV dollars are going into the internet and it's only natural that some of that will go over to mobile, first it'll be songs, and video clips then it will be more personalised. We will go through a period of opt in."

So, assuming video blogging is worth a go. The main technical issue is sending the clips from a 3G network to a central hosting site and then onto the internet. For that operators will need a video gateway to do the transcoding and the interpretation between the video and the audio codecs.

Previously just sending a picture from one handset to the next was problematic. Magnify that element with a handset that is a video terminal and it suddenly becomes a much bigger issue. "You've got a larger clip, say 20 frames per second and you need to transcode and repurpose for another terminal device upon retrieval. With picture messaging or MMS it was just a single image. Because of the limitation that says not all handsets are equal, this problem hasn't gone away, in fact it has become even more complicated," warns Vince Kadar CTO of Airwide Solutions.

According to Mitch Lewis, VP marketing and product management, Dillithium Networks, the main issue to think about is quality. "The main issue is there are really long call set up times. A video call takes about eight to ten seconds from the time that you press send to the time it goes there. There is a new standard from the ITU called MONA, that will help bring the call set up time down to one second, which is equivalent to a voice call. And that is really important to people with limited patience, like teenagers."

Tellabs Pal Dolan warns: "Service providers need to look at what they'll need to make it happen. So, while the concept is great, unless the fundamental infrastructure is there then this could end up like a lot of fads that we've had over time that just fizzle away or become very niche cults."

Neither Paris Hilton nor video blogging have managed to achieve mass-market popularity yet. Although, the heiress's early appearances on the Hiptop helped to set the scene somewhat for both her career and the usage pattern of the technology. Saucy images of topless girls will—if the Coolidge effect is to be believed—always have a market. Operators will be hoping that video blogging manages to move beyond this market and prove to be less ephemeral than the on-screen career of the hotel owner's daughter who helped launch the trend. ■