

User-generated content

## Middle Eastern cellcos brave strict laws in rush to roll out UGC services

Plans are afoot in the Middle East to launch several user-generated-content services on mobile, to tap into a big perceived demand among the region's young for means of self-expression and social networking. But the strict social norms that have helped create a pent-up appetite for such services also mean that service providers must walk through a minefield of cultural taboos and stringent laws on their way to market.

The more advanced Middle Eastern mobile markets, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, also happen to be some of the most conservative. Yet Saudi Arabian operator Mobily has recently launched a video- and picture-uploading site, and video-blogging services are in the process of being rolled out by a couple of unnamed operators, also in Saudi Arabia and in UAE.

"There only needs to be one wrong video posted for them to have the service shut down," says Mitch Lewis, senior

vice president and general manager of service providers business and corporate marketing at Delithium, the vendor supplying the video-blogging technology. The Middle East is the first territory in which the technology is being deployed.

The carriers are balancing what they feel is a strong demand for the service and the risks of falling foul of the regulator, Lewis adds.

They are not taking any chances, however. They won't allow users to upload videos to sites that haven't been previously vetted. And all content will be filtered before it is posted.

The limited mobile UGC and community services already launched in the region have seen good take-up. Such services have massive potential in the Middle East because the cultures are very sociable, says Murat Bahar, co-founder of Mobinex, a Turkey-based on-device-portal vendor.

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Young Middle Easterners are already using features such as Bluetooth for social networking. In fact, peer-to-peer Bluetooth messaging and chatting are huge in the Middle East, Bahar says. "If you go to a mall and put on your Bluetooth, you'll get a lot of messages," he says. "Mobile is very social in the Middle East."

Mobiles are used as intermediaries to overcome social barriers. Peer-to-peer Bluetooth, for example, is used for making contact with the opposite sex. "In the Middle East, most countries have very closed cultures," Bahar says. "Social interactions are very limited in the Gulf countries. You can't date a girl, but you can chat to her through mobile."

Mobinex wants to convert the de-

mand for mobile social networking and user-generated content into revenue. The company is adding community features, such as ratings and recommendations, to its on-device portals and is also looking to include chat and networking services.

Ethics are closely regulated by the state in most countries in the region, Bahar says. For example, you couldn't launch a loosely monitored video-upload site like YouTube in a country such as Saudi Arabia.

Mobily's mobile video- and picture-sharing service, Fallah, has its content carefully monitored.

A major Arabic-language broadcaster based in Egypt, Arab Radio and Television, is also about to launch

user-generated-content programming. The media company plans to use the content for mobile, web and TV.

Unwilling to reveal exact details of the service, Khaled Abou-Zeid, general manager of digital alliances at ART, says the content will "show cultures" and will be based on different themes. "We might compare lives between countries," he says. "For example, we could look at the life of a housewife in Egypt and a housewife in Saudi. We are looking at the lives of normal people."

Abou-Zeid says the content will be carefully filtered. "We are very family-oriented," he says. "The content has to meet the normal Arab culture. We don't want to offend anyone." MM

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