

Inside The Circle: Using Broadcast Sms In A Sports Club

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Abstract

With over 100% penetration, the mobile phone has become a normalised part of everyday communications in Ireland. This paper examines the use of the mobile phone within two Irish sporting clubs and finds that in both the regular practice of communication has been transformed by the use of broadcast SMS text messages sent using the 'distribution list' facility on handsets or through the web. The SMS are sent by club administrators for information distribution and as reminders for gatherings, causing an increased cohesiveness within the group.

For the administrators, broadcast SMS offers a convenience in what is a voluntary job, communicating information on fixtures, matches and training, essential for the smooth running of the club. For the club members who receive the SMS, the distribution of such information through their mobile phone has saved time and minimised travel, while strengthening their ties to the club. Both groups are enthusiastic and quote instances of how it provides new opportunities to them and how they can plan their lives around this new way of working.

Introduction and Background

The growth of mobile phones in Europe has been well documented (Dunnewijk & Hulten, 2006), and Ireland is no exception. Although the fixed line telephone was never as ubiquitous as in other European countries (Flynn & Preston, 1999), when the mobile phone became widely used for social interaction in the late 1990s, the Irish population were quick to adopt. Penetration has now reached 111%, (March 2007 figures) (ComReg, 2007). Irish mobile phone users are also avid users of the SMS service, sending on average 117 text messages per subscription per month. This reflects the "maturity of the Irish SMS market and popularity of SMS amongst young people" (Gilligan & Heinzmann, 2004:9).

Once with an economy firmly based in agriculture, Ireland owes its recent economic success to the information industry, and has a consequent growth in urban development, particularly along the east coast around the capital, Dublin. However, much of the rest of the country still reflects a widely distributed population, in particular the west (the location of this study) where 58% of the population live in small villages or open countryside linked by a few main routeways and many small roads, and with a poor public transport infrastructure. (CSO, 2003)¹ For this population, the necessity for a mobile phone takes on different meanings to those which have been described in many of the urban-based studies of young people.

The sports clubs explored in this paper comprise geographically located communities, people who live

¹ In the West, only 41.8% of the population live in towns of 1,500 people or more. The population density in this area is approximately 32 per km².

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within perhaps 10 kilometres of each other, and who regularly meet to follow their common interest in the traditional Irish sports of hurling and Gaelic football. The members of these groups were meeting and communicating long before the mobile phone was available, and so the technology per se is not enabling them to come together (as might be considered with Internet communities), but rather providing a new tool to enhance their repertoire of correspondence. The clubs have integrated the use of the mobile into their everyday patterns of communication in order to keep members informed and minimise the work and travel involved in bringing people together.

In many western countries, studies have described the decline of local communities and the consequent loss of social capital (Putnam, 2000), and this has been mirrored by Irish research (NESF, 2003)². However, much as Irish people may not be linking to their neighbours or volunteering for local ventures in the numbers they once did, evidence shows that sports activities are still well supported (Delaney&Fahey, 2005), and that both active and passive participation is high. This is particularly true for the traditional Irish sports, which are administered by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and are strong at a local level throughout the country.

The GAA is the largest sports body in Ireland, with more than 2,500 clubs on the island. These are run as voluntary, community-based initiatives which usually draw their membership from the local district, and are particularly strong in rural areas. The emphasis on community is stated in the aims of the organisation:

"The GAA club should ... [be] one that provides leisure and social activities for all ages and genders in its community. The Association and its clubs should also become involved in non-team based activities, by supporting local developments, promoting cultural activities, ... supporting schools and contributing to community infrastructure." (GAA, 2002)

There are two main games played, hurling and Gaelic football, and competitions are organised between clubs in each of the 32 counties, with progression to a country-wide competition. Each county also fields a team, with members drawn from the clubs within it. The level of interest in inter-county competitions is very high and provides a talking point for the whole country at competition peak times. The sports are also encouraged through a number of active schools competitions, and most clubs field a number of children's teams. Considering that this is a non-professional game, the levels of commitment put in by players often matches those of their semi-pro peers in other sports. The organisation is centrally administered by a paid staff in the Dublin headquarters, located in a state-of-the art stadium, but clubs retain autonomy over their activities, and all club work is voluntary.

² The Irish government have consulted with Putnam and actively speak about the importance of 'social capital' which could be lost by the increase of individualisation and commoditisation. They have set up a number of task forces to promote civic participation throughout the country. See <http://www.activecitizen.ie/>.

The game plan: Research outline

This research is based on interviews with 22 club members and supporters, exploring their use of the mobile phone for social and organisational interaction. It is backed by a survey (n = 40) gathered at local games. Players, supporters and management from two clubs participated – a hurling club (male players) located in a rural area in the West of Ireland, and a ladies' football club in Galway city, the largest conurbation (72,500 people) on the Atlantic seaboard (CSO, 2007). The research objective is to examine how mobile phone use is altering personal communication patterns among those with existing close ties. Focusing this within the GAA clubs gives access to community groups who exist within a local geographic area, and whose main communication lines have historically been with face-to-face communication. It might be assumed that the mobile phone would offer new opportunities to extend and develop these existing relationships.

During the main playing season, April through to September, teams play at least once per week, and clubs need to have regular communications with their players on activities such as fixtures, training and results. Since the nature of the sport is that people are away from their home base while participating, mobile phones are the main form of communication being used for social interaction by all concerned. They are used in a number of scenarios within the club: by administrators for their management and for intra-club communication, and by the players and supporters to stay in touch with both the club and each other. Mobile phone ownership is a given for this cohort - all of the interviewees have their own phones, and when asked they could not name anyone of their friends or acquaintances who did not carry one.

Creating our own match strategy: Club administration

Each GAA club has a formal committee who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the club and its premises (clubroom, social centre and pitches). Communication on match arrangements (fixtures and training) would originally have been done by face-to-face contacts – calling at houses, passing messages through others, or having an announcement made in the local church. In more recent years, the fixed line telephone may have reduced the amount of work this engendered, but burdened the secretary with many calls in order to ensure everyone was informed. This work has largely been replaced by the use of broadcast SMS messages sent to mobile phones.

The ability to broadcast SMS messages is the “killer application” for both GAA clubs. Sending an SMS message to a group of people can be done either through web-to-phone access, or using the ‘Distribution List’ facility found within the software of (some) handsets. All of the Irish mobile phone service providers offer a limited number of free texts per month (up to 300) and the facility through their websites to send

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texts, in a single transaction, to all members of a pre-specified group.

For the clubs, broadcast SMS enables contacting a pre-specified group of members with a single message, a facility that is not available on land-line telephones, and provides a speedy option for distributing information on matches and training. It also ensures that everyone gets the same information, and because of its asynchronous aspect, the receiver doesn't have to be present to accept a call. The club administration staff use broadcast SMS messages for a variety of reasons – organising meetings, reminders for training, and providing information on game fixtures.

One of the duties of the club secretary is to convene meetings, which usually take place on a monthly basis. To ensure maximum attendance, the secretaries of both clubs have taken it upon themselves to send reminders to the committee of the upcoming meeting. The secretary of the ladies club explains:

"You would always have been able to contact people, so text replaced phone calls. ... Now it's just handier to make a distribution list and the one text and send it to everybody."
(female, club secretary, aged 35-45)

Each adult team within the clubs has its own manager, and these managers also use broadcast SMS to remind their players of upcoming training and matches. This would originally have been done by announcing details of the next meeting to all gathered in the dressing room after a game or training session, and in that busy space, players frequently did not register what was being said. Getting an SMS message means not only do they receive the message, but they also don't have to recall all details as these are stored in the phone's 'inbox'; in effect they carry the reminder with them wherever they go. As one player remarked:

"It's easier to have a message on your phone, whereas, if you get it by post, you'll just leave it on the [kitchen] counter and forget about it." (male, player, aged 25-35)

Using broadcast SMS not only ensures the members won't forget a meeting; it also gives flexibility to the organisers around arrangements. In the past, changes such as training at a different location, or new timing for a match would have meant trying to contact a large number of people in a short time, and calling off a session in the case of, say, poor weather, was not undertaken lightly. This new flexibility means that everyone can be informed of any changes directly and quickly

The managers and committee members are all very enthusiastic about the new affordance provided by broadcast SMS. Talking about her use of the technology, one manager says:

"I do that a few times a week. I find it very, very good. To do it by land line you'd have to hang up the phone, and lift it again, and dial every number ... [and] ...engage in conversation, and sometimes the person wouldn't be there, and you'd have to go back and try that number again later. At least with a text message it's gone. And whether they

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read it there and then, or read it the next day, it will deliver eventually... It is fantastic."
(female, manager, aged 45-55)

The club members who receive the SMS are passive in this transaction – they only reply if they can't make the session. However, they too are very positive about its use. They appreciate the timeliness and speed of the information they receive, with one member describing how previously a decision on fixtures taken by a county committee on Monday evening might then have been communicated by post. This entailed the secretary writing postcards on Tuesday, and players waiting until these arrived before having confirmed arrangements:

"... at one time you wouldn't know until Thursday or Friday. Now, with the phone you know Tuesday morning." (male, player, aged 25-35)

Getting speedy updates on changes to venues or cancellation of a match due to weather conditions also eliminates unnecessary travel, an important factor especially for rural dwellers.

Interestingly, the one exception to sending group texts in each club was when wanting to send a message to underage players. The managers explained that either because the players didn't have mobiles themselves, or perhaps that the message should go to the parents who would be bringing them to matches or training session, it was often better to use another approach. In one instance, the players were all attending the same local school, and during term time that was a point of contact where a message could be delivered to the group as a whole. Only in the summer months did the manager need to call, and that was to the home rather than to the individual.

Normally club information SMS messages are sent out to everyone only by the management. However, sometimes texts are also sent as a 'daisy-chain' from player to player, not using a distribution list but rather as a 'pass it on' type message. One player described how he had got a text a few days earlier which had been 'doing the rounds':

"Tomorrow evening now we have the underage [players] receiving medals, and the older members of our club say 'Please show up, because they love to see you coming, they look up to the older lads.' And everybody got a text... I got it two or three times, off different people, so I'll definitely go up tomorrow night." (male, player, aged 25-35)

The team effect: Changing attitudes since group text

Club members are an already close social group who all live within the same area, may have gone to school together, are often related, and have a shared background and history. They also meet regularly face-to-face, seeing each other a few times a week to play football or hurling. Overall, the mobile phone

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communications serve to strengthen these (already strong) ties. Among themselves, members use text messages frequently, often to arrange face-to-face meetings, something which can be difficult for rural dwellers who do not live in easy proximity:

"It's very handy when you can just text all your friends and meet up, like. And I suppose the relationship is stronger, the more we see of each other." (male, player, aged 25-35)

A number of members remarked on the bonding effect of increased personal phone communication:

"...[with the mobile] ...you would be closer to the friends you've had for years." (male, player, aged 25-35)

When asked about the changing patterns of communication within the club brought about by mobile phone use, all of the interviewees mentioned the broadcast SMS sent by the administrators, usually referring to them as "group texts". They described how being included in the team panel or committee who receive group texts created a sense of integration into club affairs:

"... makes you feel inside the circle, like." (male, player, aged 18-25)

This point was more pertinent for younger or newer members than for others whose role was assured due to their long-term team membership or local renown as successful athletes. This feeling of inclusion has been found in other studies of group text systems, such as that of Farnham and Keyani who implemented a group text message system among a number of socially active friends. (Farnham & Keyani, 2006) In their analysis, members reported a strong sense of connection to the group, even for those who did not themselves ever broadcast messages. In a study of the impact of computer networking on community, Kavanaugh surveyed parents who were sent information through email by a school board, which in effect is the computer equivalent of a group text (Kavanaugh, 1999). In this case, 91% of respondents reported that having school issues communicated to them through the list had made them feel more involved in school issues. Being included in an information ring appears to automatically bind members to a group.

The effects of inclusion generated by the broadcast texts has also had ramifications for the social capital of the group. Social capital has been defined as:

"the degree to which a group ... uses mechanisms such as social networks, trust, reciprocity and shared norms and values to facilitate collaboration and cooperation." (Ling, 2004a)

It is a topic which has engaged the Irish government in recent years, as they are concerned that Ireland's new-found wealth has lead to a decline in how citizens might contribute to civic engagement and volunteer to support a healthy society. The role of ICTs in social capital formation has been explored in several studies (Pigg & Crank, 2004; Ling et al., 2003; Ling, 2004a; van Bavel et al., 2003; Wellman et al., 2001; Quann-Hasse & Wellman, 2002; Anderson, 2004)

Social capital is commonly considered to take two forms. These can be "bonding", which suffices to keep a

group closely connected, and “bridging”, which forges links across disparate groups (Ling, 2004a). In ways participating in a GAA club can act feed both forms. It bridges society as it is recognised in bringing together people of different politics, professions, and income groups³; and it bonds them in a way that they consider those outside the club (or in other clubs) as a distinct “other”, at least for the day of the match, and in the case of long-term rivals, as a permanent target of difference, as exposed by the colours one wears. By their very membership of the club, and the voluntary nature of their contribution, players and club administrators are engaged in generating social capital. When broadcast SMS is used to remind and encourage others to participate, it is acting to maintain (and strengthen) the existing cohesion of the group as a whole, or bonding social capital. Since the broadcast SMS are sent within the club only, they do not in any way contribute to the bridging aspects of social capital

The group texts also engendered feelings of egalitarianism within the club. Since everyone receives the same message, from the same source, at the same time, no others in the group have extra or ‘insider’ knowledge. As one club player put it:

“It is good because everyone gets the same texts. There is no one better than anybody else, everyone is kept in the same loop, and you can’t say you didn’t get it.” (female, player, aged 25-35).

Similar results have been reported by Weare et al. in their examination of the use of email for inter-group communication in voluntary community organisations. They reported that the

“... broadcast capability of the internet may allow information to be shared throughout a group efficiently, and thus reassure members that they are on an equal footing where information access is concerned.” (Weare et al., 2005)

Even the club committee members who sent the SMS were aware that they were creating important feelings of inclusion, and the delicate diplomacy ensuing:

“... people feel left out if they aren’t informed of something, whereas if quite a few people are informed, and you are the one who is not, you’d wonder why, ...they expect it.” (male, treasurer, aged 35-45)

Although using a centralised form of distribution, group texts are thus seen to disseminate power (in the form of knowledge) through spreading information.

Although no club members referred to them in this way, one could also consider these texts to be a form of control. The content of texts are directive, and while they remind players of events, they also set an expectation as to their behaviour in attending them. There has been much written on the role of mobile phones as an ‘electronic leash’ whereby parents keep tabs of their offspring and children ‘kickback’ to

³ “The GAA ... has a wide social class spread in its membership: while 40 per cent of its members are from either the skilled or semi-skilled manual classes, 33 per cent are from the higher or lower professional classes.” (Delaney & Fahey, 2005)

subvert this (Ling & Yttri, 2005). On a more macro level, broadcast SMS in particular has been used as a form of control in political contexts (Linchuan Qui, 2007). In future, club administrators may need to be careful that they do not over-use the broadcast SMS facility otherwise they may be viewed as monitoring rather than reminding members of their obligations. They may also need to be careful of the style in which the text is written. In fact, one player admitted that she sometimes ignored the group texts, which she recognised as being a generic message due to how they were worded:

"I would say that group texts are very impersonal. Say for example I get a text 'We definitely have training this evening at 7 o'clock', people might ignore it, and say 'That's a group text'. Whereas if it was sent directly, 'Hi Sandra, make sure you train this evening', you'd probably pay more heed to it." (female, player, aged 25-35)

The group text is in this case having the effect of distancing her rather than bringing her close.

While welcoming the club group texts, club members did not have a positive attitude to information texts such as those provided as a paid service (usually referred to as 'text alerts'). Only two were subscribers, both receiving sports information. In fact several respondents quoted negative experiences, either their own or a friend's, where they had signed up for such alerts, but found the service expensive as they received more than they expected, and subsequently had difficulty signing off the service. The positive attitudes towards incoming club texts was due to the fact that they know the incoming club texts are going to be directly relevant to their chosen leisure time activity and help to plan their week. The texts received from the club are also free to receive. However, one might speculate that even these might possibly be unwelcome if they were too frequent or extended beyond what is deemed necessary information.

Lessons from the sideline: Analysis

Broadcast SMS is a feature offered by both handset manufacturers and service providers, so it is not surprising that the club administrators might use it to communicate with their members.

What is perhaps unexpected is that the wholesale adoption of this 'way of using' the mobile phone has had a fairly radical change in the overall patterns of club communication and has caused the clubs to shape their work practices around it. Also significant is how its enthusiastic acceptance by club members has had a positive affect on the dynamics of the group as a whole, a fact which makes its presence now a necessary part of club interaction.

There are many instances of users shaping telephone technologies in ways that their designers did not anticipate. In the early 1900s farmers in rural parts of the United States created their own 'barbed wire' networks (Fischer, 1992); it was kin-keeping telephone calls made by women which led to the acceptance

and eventual dominance of telephones for social use (Moyal, 1995); and more recently the use of texting as a cheap means of staying in touch by teenagers established SMS as a new mode of communication (Ling, 2004b). In each instance, everyday patterns of contact were made easier by users adapting the available technology to suit their own needs. This is what is happening in the sports clubs.

The incorporation of broadcast SMS into club work patterns is an example of user innovation not by technologically skilled or elite users, but by everyday end users. Club members are not even particularly enthusiastic about their mobile phones, and in interview have described its role in their lives as a functional tool, not as a fashion object or technical gadget:

"It's not that it's important to me in my life, obviously, like, it's something that's very, very handy."
(male, player, aged 18-25)

Haddon describes such creative use as:

"daily acts of 'innovativeness', routine ways in which users actively manage their technologies." (Haddon, 2005)

The use of group texts in both clubs, which are geographically distant and not linked in any way, might suggest that this is a somewhat natural development of use which has evolved independently in both places, rather than being a novelty application which has spread through club connections.

Although a key technology in this case, SMS is generally not considered to be suitable for administration work. In one of the few studies on this topic, Svendsen et al. compare the use of SMS and email in office environments in a Scandinavian town (Svendsen et al., 2006). The authors conclude that SMS as a tool does not align with work practices in the way that email does, citing the fact that most people carry only their personal mobile phone, and prefer to use fixed line phones (paid for by their employer) rather than take on the added cost on their own mobile account. In the GAA clubs, administrators are regular club members who volunteer their time and energy to the club, taking on their post usually for one year. When doing this voluntary work, they do not use a club-provided handset, but in effect also volunteer the use of their own mobile phone, and personally pick up any costs that might accrue through sending the messages. Although they may have purchased their phone for social (recreational) use, they are actually adopting it as a work tool. In interview, no-one mentioned the added cost of keeping in touch with club members, probably because currently broadcast SMS is offered as a cheap feature (multiple sends for a single price, or with free access through the internet).

Using broadcast SMS has limitations as an effective work tool. To use the free group texts facility through a website, the phone owner must first log on using their own account details to set up a user profile. When they enter the names to be included in the group text, they set up a group which is only accessible through this profile – unique to their account. Thus, if a manager sets up the names of 20 players onto a list

entitled, say, 'senior players', and then resigns their voluntary post at the end of the year, they cannot easily pass on the details to the next manager - all numbers must be entered again. Similarly, if they use the operating system of their own handset to set up a distribution list, they cannot easily move this to the handset of an incoming manager when they resign. As a work practice, the use of personal mobile phones in this way means that the data is 'owned' by the phone user, not by the entity on whose behalf they are doing the work.

The ease of using broadcast SMS and its popularity with recipients would suggest that it will in future become a normalised and expected part of club interaction. For administrators without a computer to hand (or for use 'in the field'), it is most convenient if they have a facility on their handset to send a group text, and club administrators did state that it was an attribute they would look for when purchasing a new handset. However, not all handsets offer distribution lists as part of their operating systems. Consumer choice will certainly steer club members away from these.

Writings on the use of internet communications to connect communities of place agree that the success of ICTs in maintaining strong social networks is partly due to the fact that individuals can contribute to the community by their on-line activity (Farnham et al., 2004; Norris, 2004; Weare et al., 2005; Wellman et al. 2003) This is the same pattern that is evolving with social networking software and other web 2.0 platforms – participants contribute content to the fora, which strengthens their links to the network and adds to the synergy of the network as a whole. The networked model does not apply to using broadcast SMS in the sports clubs. The direction of communication is simplex - administrators alone send the messages, and the member recipients are inactive (unless to report a problem, and then they interact only with the administrator). Even though every member could send texts to all the others, none choose to do so, making this a centralised, top-down pattern of communication.

Despite not following the flatter, multi-stranded network model, members have reported that they believe the broadcast SMS do strengthen their group. This could be so if we consider that the texts are simply a mechanism for information sharing or coordination which, when effective, brings people together to develop the deeper exchanges which will bind them. In their examination of the potential of ICTs to build social capital, Pigg and Crank distinguish between the use of technologies to deliver *communication* and *information*, the former being expressive and the latter instrumental (Pigg & Crank, 2004). Within the clubs, the initial delivery of instrumental information by broadcast SMS is leading to face-to-face meetings which then build on communication and enhance the richer and deeper personal links which build a basis for the trust and reciprocity of social capital.

Conclusion

The mobile phone is becoming normalised in Irish society, and its use is widespread in the sports clubs included in this study. The club administrators who use broadcast SMS have a very practical attitude to its role in their lives, and yet their ways of using the device have had an important impact on the overall bonding of members to their sports club. Receiving group texts has not only saved members time and travel, but it has also strengthened ties and reinforced feelings of inclusion. This feature may need delicate handling, as over time, building the SMS into the routine of club matters will create expectations of the level of information available throughout the group, and perhaps an increased dependency on being reminded of events and kept up-to-date with club affairs. On the other hand, if overused, it may make recipients ignore the messages sent. The patterns of communications created here are contrary to the networked pattern and content subscription model evoked by most recent technologies. However, since the sender is doing a voluntary job, and one which may be taken on by any of the recipients in the future, the hierarchical direction of communication is not seen negatively. It is viewed more as providing an aide-mémoire than an order.

The club administrators who send the SMS are by no means lead users; they are simply exploiting a cheap aid to do their voluntary work. And although SMS are not normally considered a work tool, using a distribution list as a simple database in this way markedly eases the burden of communication in the club. In effect, it keeps everyone 'inside the circle'.

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