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Story Advisory

Voices from the Past Project

The Reynolds Journalism Institute this week launched a unique project in Columbia that will allow people to use their cell phones to “call” the rich legacy of the community.

Voices from the Past is part of RJI Fellow Clyde Bentley’s year-long exploration of the developing role of mobile phones as news and information platforms. Bentley, an associate professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, is working with technologies and strategies to allow newspapers and other media to provide service via the communications devices carried by 89% of American adults.

The project launched this week lets walkers, cyclists and runners on the MKT Trail satisfy a very common curiosity “itch.” All along the trail are benches inscribed with the names of people whose families and friends wanted you to remember them. But despite often intriguing phrases on the benches, there was no way for the passers-by to find out why the persons on the benches were honored.

Using technology first developed to provide self-guided museum tours, the Voices from the Past project lets people dial a special number with their cell phones to hear feature stories produced by senior convergence students at the School of Journalism. The stories include recorded quotes by family and friends and very often heart-warming details of lives well spent.

The featured benches can be recognized by small white-and-blue signs that include the phone number and instructions. Six benches are “live,” with others to be added over the next two weeks. All of the benches are on the section of the MKT Trail between Providence and Twin Lakes Park.

Although this project provides a fun service to the people of Columbia, it is also part of important research on the role of mobile phone technology on our lives. Almost all Americans now carry cell phones and by some estimates we will have more mobile phones than people within five years. Ericsson Labs recently calculated that the only technology in the world as pervasive the mobile phone is the toothbrush.

Contrary to popular perception, however, very few mobile phones have the Web-access and “app” ability of the iPhone or Blackberry. Those “smartphones” only make up 17%

of cell phones in the United States. The vast majority of phones primarily provide simple voice and text message connections.

A key issue for media managers is finding ways to provide news and information to people who have these more simple phones. Voices from the Past tests one method – give people access to recorded messages that can be heard on any phone.

The project is, in some ways, “on-demand radio.” Just as smartphone owners might search the Web to satisfy their curiosity, the Voices from the Past project allows people to dial-in on the answers they seek. While the current project ties trail users to a bit of Columbia history, the same technology could be used for expanded features and hard news. Festival-goers could enhance their enjoyment with additional information – listening to the cooks explain their recipes at the Roots ‘n Blues ‘n BBQ Festival, for instance. A complex zoning issue might be easier to understand if citizens could go to the spot and listen to explanations of the proposal while actually looking at site.

Key to the latter is another feature being tested through the Voices from the Past project. After listening to a story, users can press 0# and leave their own comments. For the current project, this might include personal memories of the featured person or comments on how to improve the project. For the zoning story, the comments might be part of the public input the city uses to make its decision.

Voices from the Past is a cooperative venture of the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute and the City of Columbia Parks and Recreation Department. The stories were produced by journalism students Ryan Huber, Rachel Moten and Jashin Lin. The bench signs were constructed by students at the University of Missouri College of Engineering.

This is a test project that is currently funded through May.

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