

Al Jazeera uses IVR technology to cover Kenya elections

In the recent Kenyan elections, Al Jazeera employed both voice and SMS technologies to aid its extensive coverage and citizen reporting.



Kenya is known for its high mobile phone penetration, as well as related innovations like M-Pesa (mobile money) and Ushahidi, a crisis-mapping tool that had its roots in the 2007-2008 post-election violence that marred the previous Kenyan elections.

For the March 2013 elections, Al Jazeera used Interactive Voice Response (IVR) technology to create an additional interface to connect feature phones to the web.

How it works

Cynara Vetch, the project manager of Al Jazeera Voices, explains, "Al Jazeera Voices is an audio system that allows audiences to listen to, interact with and create citizen reports for Al Jazeera via low-end handsets, without any need for a data plan. The concept is to connect with audiences that are offline and off grid, people that Al Jazeera often cannot access or hear from. Voices is one solution in bridging the gap between vocal, connected voices, whose stories are having an impact on the media through social media, and those that still remain relatively unheard because they don't have the same access."

The Al Jazeera Voices system was built in collaboration with The World Wide Web Foundation and has been rolled out with various community partners.

Subscribers on the Safaricom network in Kenya could access the service by calling a toll-free number. Kenyan Voices received 2 066 calls, with the callers listening to 942 bulletins and leaving 609 reports.

Al Jazeera worked with The National Youth Sector Alliance and Kibera TV to set up virtual newsrooms, where content was moderated locally and meta-data attached before being forwarded to the Al Jazeera newsrooms.

Similar projects

A similar pilot project was conducted in Ghana during their December 2012 elections, where about 2 000 people dialed into

the service, with a 50% content consumption rate and a 20% engagement rate.

"Both Kenya and Ghana have been conducted as pilots and not mass marketed services," says Soud Hyder, Al Jazeera English's new media analyst. "The aim is to evaluate the use of IVR in citizen reporting, as well as to distribute news and information to audiences we would not otherwise reach."

For more, go to www.aljazeera.com/indepth/spotlight/kenya2013

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