Chatbot launched to connect new mothers

DURBAN, South Africa - Through the advent of Messenger and bots, messaging platforms have rapidly increased their impact in reaching users with life-changing content. Leading this technological evolution in low and middle income countries, the Praekelt Foundation, launched a new chatbot for Messenger integrated into the South African Department of Health's MomConnect, at the 21st International AIDS Conference in Durban yesterday, 19 July 2016.



Connecting moms

The bot will provide mothers with a more affordable, engaging way to access the stage-based messages currently provided by the technology's SMS services.

Founded in 2007, Praekelt Foundation uses open source technologies to deliver essential information and inclusive services to millions of people in low income countries. With over 10 million South Africans now on Facebook, and over 75% using it on their mobile devices, Praekelt has chosen to expand MomConnect services through the introduction of the bot.

The newest innovation in messaging technology, bots unlock the ability to provide personalised, interactive communication akin to talking to a human customer service or sales rep, but at scale for much cheaper than call centres.

MomConnect's new bot will be seamlessly integrated into the existing platform, offering Messenger as a more financially affordable method in which mothers, nurses, and child health workers can access additional content and services.

With 900 million users, Messenger is one of the most-used chat apps on the planet with more than 11,000 bots added since the platform launched in April. Messenger allows for larger character limits than SMS and none of the time-outs of USSD. Users send 60 billion messages per day using messenger - more than three times the global daily SMS volume.

“We focus on providing innovative and scalable solutions for those in need of access to information in low income countries by keeping ahead of changing technology as well as the changing needs of the end user. We launched MomConnect in 2014, before the rise of Messenger. To be relevant with the latest technologies, we have created a bot to integrate into the platform, as they allow mothers and health care professionals a cheaper way to access vital maternal health and HIV information personalised to them directly on their mobile devices. We’re proud to lead their integration into health systems” Praekelt Foundation founder and CEO, Gustav Praekelt, noted.

Currently, MomConnect improves the supply of maternal health information in South Africa for over 850,000 subscribers. These subscribers will now have access to maternal health information through Messenger.

Allowing HIV + mothers and those with high-risk pregnancies to have an alternative platform for receiving stage-based messages, the bot gives them access to a resource of information around HIV, pregnancy, delivery and a baby’s first year, as well as a future helpdesk to offer mothers a platform where they can have their questions answered by live operators and escalated to health professional.

Simon de Haan, chief engineer at Praekelt Foundation, described the benefits of the bot: “Starting with maternal health care, access to essential information delivered via Messenger poses a fundamental shift in how personal health services are delivered at national scale in emerging markets. Our maternal health services are made possible by our open-source Junebug integration for Messenger and we are excited about the potential this open-source release creates for the wider health and technology industry.”

Over the course of the five day conference in Durban, participants will be able to experience the value of the bot first hand by signing up for messages and having them delivered in an accelerated schedule via the messenger set up for MomConnect.

Praekelt Foundation plans to roll out the technology to its existing suites in other African countries which have replicated the MomConnect model, including Hello Mama in Nigeria and Family Connect in Uganda.

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