

***The Star* newspaper takes lead in citizen journalism**

You cannot have a conversation about Kenya these days without mentioning the latest buzz phrase, 'the mobile revolution.'

By [Dickens Olewe](#) ^{3 Sep 2012}

Figures released by the Communication Commission of Kenya (CCK) in July 2012 indicate that the mobile ownership trajectory continues to rise, with 74% of the population now owning a mobile phone. Significantly 98.8% of internet access in the country is through mobile phones. These indicators have spawned a new mobile industry which is creating and innovating niche products and services for the new market.

Kenya is renowned around the world for its innovative mobile money system which has changed how people send, receive and save money, a concept that's currently being replicated by many other countries. Concurrently the mobile phone is leading another revolution: how people consume, share and interact with news.

Mobile phones have morphed from luxury tools of communication into complex gadgets with various functionalities. The look of mobile phones has changed from the bulky and ugly low end feature phones, limited to voice calls, to smartphones which put user experience at the heart of development.

In Kenya smartphones are becoming cheaper and accessing the internet is becoming more affordable, allowing people to engage more in social media platforms. When it comes to news, mobile phone users have shown an eagerness to set their own agenda; they are no longer passive spectators but active contributors to news reporting. These developments have brought with them an incredible opportunity for media.

Nowadays citizens do not wait for journalists to cover their stories - the mobile phone has empowered them to record videos, take pictures and type their own stories which they are willing to share with traditional media and/ or post in blogs and social media platforms. 2011 was arguably the year of the mobile phone.

During the Arab Spring, pro-democracy activists in the Arab world used it as their tool of choice to organise rallies, and report and share their stories which were mostly used to discount the propaganda of repressive governments. The mobile phone was used in the 'Occupy' movements in America and Europe and the Free Syrian army is continuously uploading videos on Youtube to counter the government narrative of the crisis in Syria. The mobile phone has given people power a massive lift.

Only last week the protests that occurred in Mombasa after the killing of Muslim cleric Aboud Rogo proved again the untapped power of citizen journalism. Mombasa residents on social media were using their phones to upload photos on Twitter and Facebook, providing multiple witness accounts about areas that were affected by the riots.

This form of active citizen journalism provided a clear picture of the situation on the ground. In recent months several big stories have also been captured using mobile phones, such as the floods in Hell's Gate National Park which killed 7 people, the Moi Avenue blast, and the chopper crash in which top government officials were killed.

The first pictures used by the television networks in these big stories were a product of active citizen journalism. An increasing number of people are telling their own stories every day on social media, Nairobi residents are especially known for their updates about the traffic situation on the roads. Despite these developments traditional media in Kenya has been slow to take advantage of this trend.

The public is no longer interested in only engaging with the media through closed ended 'Yes or No' SMS based opinion polling that has become the signature menu of all prime time broadcasts; they want to participate in answering the 5Ws and H. The media therefore has to be proactive and pursue a partnership with the public that will harness their energy and interest in participating in news gathering, reporting and distribution.

Last year, *The Star* newspaper received a grant from the World Association of Newspapers through the Mobile News in Africa Project to implement a citizen journalism mobile application project which has been named Star Reports. Star Reports is our answer to the question of whether collaboration between traditional media and citizens is possible.

In a three step process the user can sign up, create and share their story. The app's interface is easy to navigate. Star Reports is hyperlocal in that it allows the user to create their story and share it with people in Kenya. This means that there will be no more getting lost in hashtags or getting distracted with foreign links users will be able to get news filed by people from all counties in Kenya. All reports sent by users will be loaded on the report stream and citizen reports will also be uploaded on a dedicated website. The reports will be anything that the user considers important - traffic, weddings, sports, graduation ceremonies, election related stories - the possibilities are endless.

The reports will also feed into the Star's workflow and used as sources of news in the newspaper as well as the affiliated radio and TV stations. Star Reports will be an important reporting tool for journalists and users can benefit from getting the latest stories filed by Star journalists in their areas, in particular breaking news.

The app will be exclusively available on the Android platform due to the high number of Android phones on the Kenyan market. However, the second version of Star Reports, which will be launched in the next few months, will be compatible across all platforms. We are excited about this new product, which we believe will encourage citizen journalism in Kenya and foster collaboration between citizens and the media. Star Reports can now be downloaded from Google Play.

Source: [allAfrica](#)