

# FrontlineSMS

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
FrontlineSMS	Social Impact Lab (formerly The Kiwanja Foundation)	A platform that enables journalists to more effectively use text messaging to inform and engage rural communities	\$250,000

Mobile phones are increasingly common even in developing countries with low literacy rates and large rural populations. SMS and MMS messaging (text messaging) are similarly popular and are among the most effective ways to quickly reach large numbers of people in many communities. Although many tools for communicating with people via mobile phones exist, few SMS management systems are designed specifically for journalists and news organizations. FrontlineSMS was awarded News Challenge funding in 2011 to expand and improve its existing platform, which enables users in developing and rural areas to organize interactions with large numbers of people via SMS, and to tailor this platform to the needs of journalists and news organizations around the world.

## THE INNOVATION

Introduced in 2005, FrontlineSMS is an open source platform that enables users in areas with poor communications infrastructures to disseminate and exchange information with large numbers of people over cell phone networks without the need for the internet. The first version of FrontlineSMS was a free desktop application that allowed users to reach large groups via text messages, using just a laptop and a mobile phone. FrontlineSMS was awarded News Challenge funding to further develop its software for use by journalists and to work with community news organizations and radio stations to more effectively use text messaging to inform and engage rural communities. The project later developed FrontlineCloud, a similar, web-hosted platform that allows users

to log in wherever they have internet access and to run projects remotely.

## IMPLEMENTATION

At the outset of its News Challenge grant, the FrontlineSMS team intended to expand its original application and release a specific plug-in for use by journalists and community news organizations. The team hired Trevor Knoblich as its media project director and revised its original plans to include a research and consultation phase to gather feedback on the needs of rural media outlets and organizations already familiar with FrontlineSMS. After surveys and extensive interviews with members of media outlets from around the world, FrontlineSMS found that news organizations hoped to use the tool in three ways:

- To disseminate news headlines, tips, or follow-ups to long-form pieces to large subscription lists
- To coordinate staff, freelancers, photographers, and citizen journalists
- To solicit requests for information via a dedicated phone line ("Text us if you see harassment in your neighborhood," for example)

FrontlineSMS released the second version of its original modem-based platform in June 2012 using its News Challenge funding. Within the first fourteen months of its release, version two of FrontlineSMS was downloaded more than 150,000 times. The original FrontlineSMS tool used a modem that allowed a user to send only eight messages per minute. In speaking with journalists and other potential users about their

needs, however, the FrontlineSMS team realized that media outlets preferred an online mechanism for managing their mobile communications. News organizations also needed a tool that would allow them to send urgent news alerts to a larger audience more quickly. In response, the team began developing FrontlineCloud, the web-based version of FrontlineSMS. Unlike FrontlineSMS, FrontlineCloud requires internet access. But it provides news organizations and journalists with a more flexible option for disseminating news headlines and information.

In early 2014, FrontlineCloud was still in the beta testing phase. The team was also working to build an interoperable product set that would allow users to smoothly transition between online use with FrontlineCloud and offline use with FrontlineSMS. FrontlineSMS continues to offer a range of premium user support and paid-for consulting services to provide an additional revenue stream to support its work. These services include mobile integration and program design assistance, staff training, software customization, dedicated technical support, and evaluation support.

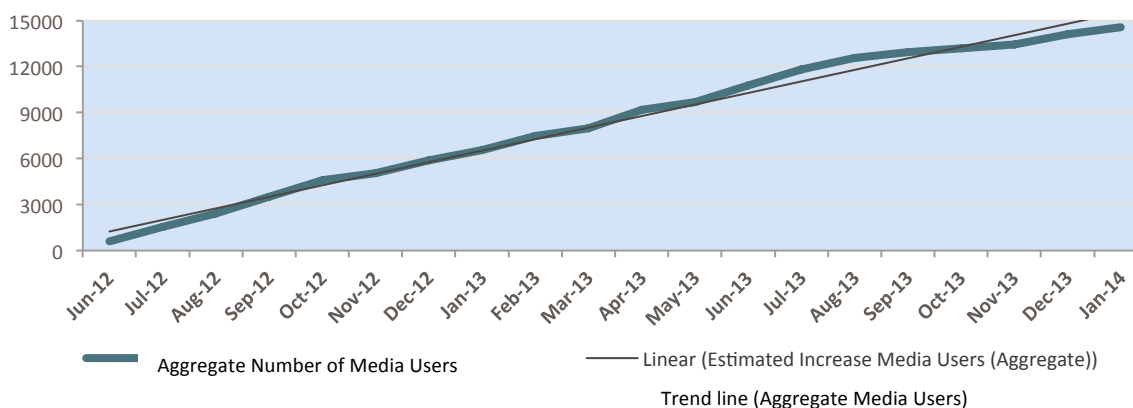
## REACH AND OUTCOMES

As of January 2014, the second version of FrontlineSMS had been downloaded more than 177,850 times—more than seven times the number of downloads of version one. FrontlineSMS’s downloads continue to grow at

a steady pace, with an average of about 730 monthly downloads by journalists and others in the media. An estimated 14,500 journalists are using FrontlineSMS in 76 countries across the world, including Eastern, Central, and sub-Saharan Africa; Southeast Asia; Pakistan; Indonesia; the United States; and the Philippines. News organizations using the tool include rural radio stations in Uganda and Kenya; larger media outlets like the *Kenya Star*; and multinational news outlets such as the BBC, *The Guardian*, and Al Jazeera. In Indonesia, rural farmers, journalists from Internews, and environmental advocates are using FrontlineSMS to report, connect, and raise awareness of palm oil corporations’ destructive environmental practices. After one story by Ruai TV, the local palm oil company agreed to repair a road that had long been a source of contention with the community.

Although the focus of FrontlineSMS’s News Challenge grant was to release a plug-in specifically tailored for journalists and community news organizations, the tool is actually used by both news organizations and the nonprofit community. Organizations working to combat malaria have used FrontlineSMS to connect people to health services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In December 2013, the project received a \$1.5 million Google Impact Award for a three-year partnership with the nonprofit Landesa to help secure land rights for over 80,000 families

### FrontlineSMS Users



in Odisha, India. FrontlineSMS also received awards from the Hewlett Foundation and the United Nations Democracy Fund to train civil society groups and governments in ways to use SMS to create more efficient service delivery mechanisms around the world.

Looking ahead, the project team plans to add a missed-calls feature that provides users with a free and easy way to call organizations through their FrontlineCloud and FrontlineSMS accounts. The team continues to work on building an interoperable product set to allow for smooth transitions between FrontlineCloud and FrontlineSMS. And through the course of 2015, Social Impact Lab plans to support Frontline SMS in the process of forming its own independent organization, in the hope of attracting even greater investment in the platform.