

Is That a Newspaper on Your Cell Phone?

Wireless publishing is in the works, but still involves challenges, decisions.

Yardena Arar, PCWorld.com

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Articles now confined to books, magazines, and similar print media will appear on phones and handhelds as wireless telecommunications proliferate--but it won't happen quickly or easily.

That was the overall message from a "Wireless World" panel discussion, part of the Seybold Seminars conference here this week. The conference covers all aspects of print and electronic publishing, including content creation, management, and delivery.

Wireless Quandaries

While mobile phones now outnumber conventional phones--1.3 billion cell phones are in use worldwide versus 1.1 billion wired lines--paper remains king for distributing information, noted panel moderator Paul Ziek, a product manager for Savant Services.

Paper is portable, and "people roam. It's a natural part of being human," Ziek said. Paper is also inexpensive and fairly durable, with a shelf life of 30 years or more, he added.

But Vin Crosbie, managing partner for Digital Deliverance, said sharing content digitally will gain popularity because it is convenient.

"By the end of the decade, you're going to see electronic books, papers, and magazines," he said.

Shannon Maher, vice president of wireless development for America Online, cited several challenges facing publishers who plan for a wireless future. They have to decide what types of wireless devices to target--phones, personal digital assistants, Wi-Fi-enabled devices, or devices on cellular networks, for example.

Publishers' choice of business models will affect pricing for consumers, carriers, and content providers, she added.

"We need to make it easier for people to just publish," Maher said.

IM Leads the List

People with wireless devices are already using them for at least some text communications, as opposed to strictly voice interaction.

Instant messaging is by far the most popular example of wireless data communications in the U.S., panelists noted. But

in the U.S., people aren't using their data-capable cell phones for SMS text messages, which are hugely popular in Europe, or even for e-mail.

Right now, AOL users equipped with phones and connected PDAs are sending more than one million instant messages every week, Maher said.