UQ research opens up new ways of communicating

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While guidebooks may be a traveller's best friend when exploring new and unusual places, sometimes they fall short in providing up to date information. But a University of Queensland PhD student is hoping his research could change that by employing the latest developments in mobile communication.

Jeff Axup is studying the potential of "mobile information sharing", a concept that goes beyond the traditional guidebook and introduces the concept of everyday people electronically sharing their experiences with other travellers while they are on the road.

"We are looking at ways for communities, or in this case backpackers, to communicate in a timely and immediate way," Mr Axup said.

"Imagine if, as a traveller, you were able to get first hand information from other travellers who had just been to where you want to go.

"But instead of hoping to find the right person by chance, you could be notified when you are near them, or be able to rapidly search travel diaries of relevant people.

"What we are looking at is not really a replacement for guidebooks, travel agents or bulletin boards, but rather an extension or addition to existing methods to make the travelling experience richer and more rewarding."

He said this concept of "social pairing system" could eventually be used by other types of mobile groups or communities such as business travellers, delivery workers or taxi drivers.

"I am looking at ways for people who have a common interest, but have never met before, to be able to easily communicate and share common experiences," he said.

"Already that is happening in some degree with SMS, instant messaging and internet forums, but I am looking at small and local interactions that are very immediate and potentially helpful.

"This may involve things like geo-tagging, where people leave behind "electronic graffiti" for fellow travellers or other location-based services."

Mr Axup said his research, done through the Interaction Design Research Division in the School of Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, would ultimately lead to developing software applications that could be used on existing and future mobile phones and communicators.

This would support travellers who want to socialise and exchange information in new ways, but without the cost of buying new special-purpose hardware.

"You can always come up with a new and amazing piece of technology but the problem is making sure people will use it," he said.

"That means developing the technology with users in natural environments and building inexpensive solutions that extend what they are already doing.

"Backpackers and even baby boomers are already very tech savvy.

"They are increasingly carrying higher-end technologies with them on the road and utilising new Internet technologies such as blogs.

"This is all about enabling communities to achieve what they want to do, but with less hassle and more effectiveness."

More information on Mr Axup's work can be found at http://www.itee.uq.edu.au/~backpack/

Source: University of Queensland

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