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Untravel Media wants tourists to go mobile

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You see it around the city all the time: people tapping at their cell phone keypads, seemingly oblivious to their surroundings. But in entrepreneur Michael Epstein's vision, those mobile phones could actually teach people quite a bit about the world around them.

Epstein is the founder and CEO of Boston-based **Untravel Media Inc.**, a startup creating a new platform for tourism offices and cultural centers to turn documentaries into mobile tours.

There are many tourism boards and museums, Epstein said, "that are really facing a blank spot with mobile."

So Untravel Media is drawing on the elements of electronic audio tours and full-fledged documentaries and making them available to mobile phones. For instance, the four-person startup commissioned a documentary about the controversial history of Boston's West End neighborhood, which it then adapted for mobile devices. People who download the documentary can see archived footage while being guided around the modern-day area, which rose from the rubble of an infamous 1950s urban renewal crusade.

Competing companies such as San Francisco-based **Guided by Cell** and New York-based **Candide Media Works** are already offering mobile phone tours. But even though mobile tours have become more popular in recent years, Untravel Media is different in that it is focused on establishing a platform for companies to craft their own mobile tours.

Untravel Media -- which is seeking angel funding -- used a \$46,000 grant it received from the **National Science Foundation** to develop the alpha phase of its Mobile Narrative System platform, which would let tourism offices and cultural centers map their own routes and align it with audio and images from documentaries.

Epstein said the company would let customers use the software for free but would split licensing fees for the documentary content employed with the filmmakers that produce it. Untravel Media would also seek out advertising revenue by dropping in ads -- such as text messages or images -- for nearby businesses into the tours, which could be viewed on cell phones, video iPod players and potentially GPS navigation devices.



W. Marc Bernsau

Michael Epstein of Untravel Media wants to offer tourism outfits a platform to tap mobile devices.

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The company, which launched in 2006, is currently putting together a tour for the **Cambridge Office for Tourism**.

"(Tourists) want to go straight to **Harvard** (University) and rub the foot of the (John Harvard) statue and then they're sort of at a loss as to what to do next," said Robyn Bell, the office's executive director. "The hope is this pulls them into different parts of the square that they wouldn't normally go to."

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