Citizen initiatives in Haiti

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The 2010 earthquake in Haiti ushered in a new era for the role and power of technology and communication systems in disaster response – especially for how local responders used them.

The response to the Haiti earthquake was particularly characterised by the first-time involvement of technology actors such as Ushahidi[1] and Crisismappers[2] who capitalised on the widespread ownership and use of phones in Haiti as well as the ability to involve the diaspora through web platforms and social media.

For Haitians, the use of technology as a response tool was perhaps less surprising than for international responders. Although they live in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere, 80-90% of Haitians own mobile phones. As a result, they were already comfortable with information exchange and access via SMS and call centres. The ability of widespread phone ownership to facilitate phone-ins and dialogue with audiences has also long been recognised by Haiti's radio community, by far the most popular and widespread form of mass media in the country.

Radio One

At the moment of the quake on 12 January 2010, music producer and Radio One DJ Carel Pedre got out of his car that he had been driving through Port-au-Prince at the time and began taking pictures of collapsed buildings around him on his Blackberry. He uploaded them to his Twitter feed and Facebook page as he began running through the rubble to see if his home and his daughter were safe. Within minutes, responses began to pour in: shock, sympathy – and pleas for Carel's help in finding loved ones. Carel found his daughter safe, returned to the radio studio, turned on the microphone and began to talk. As he did, people began arriving at the studio desperate to make announcements that they were alive. Carel and his team realised they had the power to connect people – and began to develop a family reunification system. Carel Pedre was just one of many Haitians after 12 January who used their technological and communications expertise to generate local information systems.

Radio One was one of several stations that found themselves managing ad hoc reunification but it was especially influential because it broadcasts

Three main models were employed by international responders in the early days: 1) 'blast' SMS (indiscriminate messaging to all subscribers); 2) subscription-based information systems such as the Thomson Reuters Foundation's Emergency Information Service; and 3) systems that asked Haitians to provide information about their needs (Ushahidi – an interactive mapping tool). Collectively the latter two systems became meshed together and known as Project 4636, after the text shortcode that survivors could use to access the service.

nationwide and online, and because Carel himself is a well-known broadcaster with an established presence on Twitter and Facebook. He and his team developed a system using the tools Haitians were using to contact them: social media, radio and face-to-face contact. Teams of producers took messages from those arriving at the station, and monitored four computers logged into Carel's Facebook page, reading messages and cataloguing requests. Requests and names were logged and given each morning to the station's motorbike courier, who traced as many as he could. When he returned each day the verified information was uploaded to Facebook and also broadcast live. By meshing Facebook, Twitter, live broadcasting and on-the-ground reporting, Carel and his colleagues created a responsive, effective, locally based and Creole-speaking family reunification system that supported an audience across Haiti and the Haitian diaspora in reconnecting with friends and family – with no external assistance.


IFRC

Radyo Kwa Wouj is a live 1-hour radio show broadcast twice weekly across Haiti on national networks. Topics include cholera, hurricane preparedness, shelter, first aid, etc. This show involved Jude Celorge, a Haitian Red Cross first aider, Lydia Prophete, who works in the Haitian Red Cross communications team, and Jean Maire Gesner, Communications Manager with the Haitian Red Cross and co-presenter of the weekly show.

'Nou la'

A different use of technology for response was developed a short distance away by the team of Kurt Jean Charles, director of technology company Solutions. After talking to community leaders who were trying to organise a response, his staff developed the idea of an online platform to map needs and where people could get help (none of them had heard of 'crowdsourcing' – see box opposite).

Staff drew on past experience working with USAID in mapping health systems to establish their system – called 'Noula', from the Creole 'nou la' for 'we are there' – for mapping needs and sources of assistance in their locality. They opted for a call-based system rather than SMS, judging – rightly, it appeared – that people preferred to talk to a person. The team worked from the garden outside the office as people were too frightened to go indoors, handling 25,000 calls over the next six months with no promotional work and quickly generating maps of community concerns and needs (analysable for trends over time) and local capacity to respond.

Recognising the need to connect with those who were meeting people's needs, Kurt reached out to local government and international organisations. The local government had little capacity to respond. International organisations, meanwhile, were interested but unable to engage. As Kurt explains, "I did a number of presentations for international teams. They got it, but I felt our project was seen as in competition with platforms like the UN's OneResponse although it was actually very different. There were also assumptions made because I came from a business context. People thought, oh, you are a software company so they assume you want business even though we explained we were a citizen initiative."

Crowdsourcing is the act of outsourcing tasks, traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, to an undefined, large group of people or community (a 'crowd'), through an open call.

Properly supported, a project like Noula could have deeply influenced the aid world though it only gained traction several months afterwards through the Ushahidi partnership. Noula staff, for example, noticed elementary errors in UN data. "In the list of camps you could clearly see typing errors and duplications – I knew because I knew the places. For me it was obvious." Noula also received many calls from earthquake survivors living with host families across the country, most asking how they could access assistance where they were. This presented a vital – and missed – opportunity to map displacement and use this data to decentralise the response, thus preventing the drift of survivors back to congested Port-au-Prince.

Over a year after the earthquake, it is impossible to count how many people were helped by these systems but the level of response and the clear demand from the population for someone to speak to and to express their views were evident in the number of people queuing for hours outside radio stations and the number of calls to Noula.

Both Noula and Radio One reported that many callers or visitors to their studio simply wanted to tell their story and to feel that someone was listening to them; for them the process of being able to communicate

was as significant as whether their question was answered or their issue dealt with. infoasaid did two months of research in Haiti, capturing and analysing best practice in communication.[3] Overall for Haitians one of the clear themes emerging from the research was the need to be listened to; even with SMS systems people expect a response.

Going international

A major challenge in understanding the Haitian perspective is most organisations' lack of analysis of the survivor perspective. All available evidence suggests that when it comes to communications between responders and the affected community, disaster survivors are actually far more comfortable with technology-based information systems than humanitarians are. Humanitarians tend to have a poorer understanding of such systems and view them with considerable scepticism.

Some international organisations in Haiti began introducing technology as a communications tool in a more sophisticated fashion, notably the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) which pioneered a relationship with local phone company Voila and its parent company Trilogy to develop SMS systems that target recipients by their geographic allocation, giving scope for far more nuance than blast SMS. They also established a Red Cross Information Line providing advice on cholera and on hurricane response. The line received 130,000 calls during the cholera epidemic and 400,000 about the hurricane season. IFRC also went into partnership with Noula on a pilot helpline for residents of a camp with acute shelter needs.

Pioneering this has not been straightforward for the IFRC. Staff found that developing key messages in 140 characters was difficult, but outsourcing the call centre to Noula, a service that the IFRC did not have the capacity to run alone, proved worthwhile. Incoming data has helped identify cases where beneficiaries feel their vulnerability has been wrongly assessed, allowing the IFRC team to follow up.

The growing technological capacity within Haiti has also already led to Haitians supporting other responses. The Haitian Open Street Map team, supported and developed by IOM, has provided technical mapping support to the emergency responses in Libya and Japan. In Libya, when the UN for the first time formally requested assistance from Crisismappers to map areas out of reach to humanitarians, the Haitian team was one of the only dedicated full-time crisismapping teams in the world. Working with international partners, they worked to translate satellite imagery into functioning maps for use in the response.

IFRC

SMS text reads: Red Cross: Reserves of clean drinking water, food, medicines, a torch and water-proof covering for your documents are essential items to be prepared.

Conclusions

The experience of local people in Haiti carries important lessons for those considering how to work with technology to gather and share information in disasters.

While methods may be highly technical, communication as a process is deeply rooted in local culture. The IFRC found that the key to good beneficiary communications was understanding that people interact with technology in different ways in different contexts.

While technology experts in disaster-affected countries have a unique set of skills and need to be involved in discussions at the international level, the Haiti case suggests that innovation in use of technology and social media is being driven primarily at field level by 'beneficiaries'; more understanding of how they are using these tools is essential.

Ways must be found to support and connect with indigenous systems. Although Noula and Ushahidi – very similar systems – did connect eventually, it took months. Connections between local media family reunification and services run by international responders never did occur in any meaningful way.

Thus the key lesson of Haiti for international responders is that for information and communications systems to deliver, they must engage local populations and their technical capacity as equal partners, and they must understand and connect with existing systems before developing new ones. Crucially, for survivors the process of accessing information and being listened to matters as much as the content. Local leadership on all this is key on many levels beyond mere delivery of information. As Kurt from Noula puts it, "We wanted to show that we could take some responsibility to change things at our own level, at a Haitian level. The more we can take responsibility for our situation, the more we can communicate and negotiate with the aid world."

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The data and perspectives here are the result of two months of research in Haiti for the infoasaid project (http://infoasaid.org/).

1. www.ushahidi.com/
See also article by Galya Ruffer pp20-21.

2. www.crisismappers.net

3. infoasaid is a joint project between the BBC World Service Trust and Internews, funded by DfID, which works to improve how aid organisations communicate with disaster-affected communities in emergency response. See box p37.