Foreword

T Alexander Aleinikoff

Rows of huts, spread out over a dry and dusty terrain. Tented warehouses, containing food, blankets, shelter materials and tools. A makeshift marketplace, where basic items such as batteries, buckets, soap and second-hand clothes are sold. And hand-powered pumps surrounded by a throng of people (most of them women) waiting to collect their family’s water supply.

Internet cafés have sprung up in some settlements, the hardware purchased by refugee entrepreneurs or donated by humanitarian organisations such as UNHCR. And aid agencies themselves are increasingly making use of advanced technology: geographic information systems, Skype, biometric databases and Google Earth, to give just a few examples.

The importance of technology is even more pronounced in urban settings, where a growing proportion of the world’s forced migrants are to be found. In some cities, UNHCR now communicates with its clients by text message and provides them with financial assistance through ATM cards. Telephone hotlines enable urban refugees to report protection incidents as soon as they take place, while those who are not satisfied with the services that UNHCR provides can make use of an online complaints facility.

As these examples indicate, technology is increasingly significant in the life of refugees and the agencies that support them. I am therefore delighted that Forced Migration Review has chosen to dedicate its current issue to this important theme. New technologies are changing the environment in which we work, creating risks that we must not ignore while bringing opportunities for both displaced people and those who work on their behalf.

T Alexander Aleinikoff is the Deputy UN High Commissioner for Refugees. He can be contacted through HQPD00@unhcr.org

Citizen initiatives in Haiti

Imogen Wall

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 Ushahidi1 and Crisismappers2 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.