Technology

Wiki recipes for disasters

Twitter site beat the U.S.Geological Survey to China earthquake info

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Just as the world was starting to grasp the gravity of the situation in Burma, with over 38,000 dead and many times that number in danger of disease and starvation, tragedy struck in China. The earthquake in Sichuan province has killed 15,000 so far, a toll that is expected to rise as authorities explore the ruins.

Earthquakes are notoriously difficult to predict, but the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) does an admirable job of tracking tectonic activity across the world and providing early warnings for people in quake zones. The USGS was able to report on the Chinese event after only a few minutes.

Still, it was no match for Twitter. People plugged into the instant messaging/group chat application began hearing news of the quake while it was actually happening, seconds after the first tremors. First-?hand ac-counts flew through cyberspace informing people of the quake before even the USGS knew it was happening.

Reports then appeared on GoogleNews and Wikipedia, and after about an hour, CNN got on board with a "breaking news" bulletin. In fact, the story had already broken.

Twitter only scooped the USGS by a few minutes, so the time lag wasn't huge, but the real news is that an army of experts were scooped by amateurs who were plugged into a social networking site.

The latest arrival on the social networking scene, Twitter has a reputation for being a reliable news source. Much like Wikipedia's, its content is generated by its users – the "open-?source" approach that makes traditional news organizations shudder.

But more and more authority figures are looking to such applications to aid in disaster reporting and even to coordinate relief efforts. During last year's California wildfires, while the mainstream press was obsessing over the loss of celebrity homes in Malibu, the real work of co-ordinating relief was done by the masses via instant messaging, swapping Google-Maps images and Facebook pages.

The people on the ground affected by the fires exchanged information that was much more up-to-date than that of the news organizations, because it was decentralized and user-?generated, the users being the people who were in the most danger. Firefighters and emergency workers began coordinating their efforts with the people using these networks to make their job easier.

In Washington, DC last week (May 4-7), the International Conference on Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management discussed such efforts and how to best harness the power of these tools without giving up control of disaster situations entirely.

The American Red Cross currently uses Twitter to trade information ra-pidly about the details of emergency situations. The USGS itself has a section on its site called "Did You Feel It?" where people can enter their position and whether or not they felt the tremors of a quake.

As the world's eyes turn to China and the never- ending stream of images and reports coming across its borders, we may forget about Burma. The aftermath of the cyclone in that country reveals – through its absence – the power of techno-logy to mobilize people. First-?hand reports are only available through the efforts of prying journalists grudgingly allowed into Burma, a process that is taking days.

In Burma, cellphones are rare, and Web access is severely limited by the repressive ruling regime. Access to such technologies is fundamental in a democracy and crucial to communicating with the rest of the world.

In a disaster, the more instantaneous the communication the better.

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