

The Social Media Response to Disaster in Haiti

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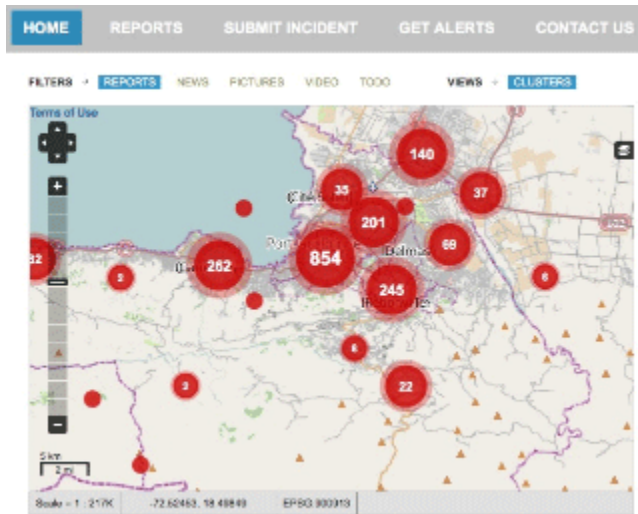


Amy Sample Ward, [NetSquared](#)

When disaster strikes, we want information as soon as possible and we want to help just as quickly. How can we do that? Whether we look at mapping tools, fundraising, or missing person systems, the social media response to the January earthquakes in Haiti all leverage the powerful technology we can hold in our hands: our mobile phones. But the way we think about and turn to social media in a time of disaster is changing.

The disaster in Haiti is a perfect example of these changes: the impact of the Real-Time Web and the power of our phones.

Mapping



[Ushahidi](#) was originally designed as a tool for mapping reports of violence in Kenya after the post-election unrest in 2008. Reports of violence and of peace efforts could be placed via the web or mobile phone. It eventually garnered 45,000 users who took advantage of the easy-to-access tool to place reports. This proved to the Ushahidi team that their tool would be valuable to communities around the world. Since then, the platform (which is [open source](#)) has been modified for use in [South Africa](#) (mapping xenophobic violence), [DR Congo](#), [Vote Report India](#) (to monitor the recent local elections) and more.

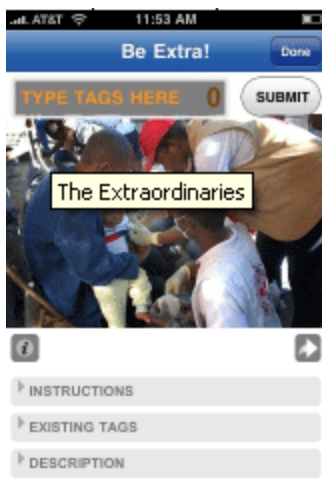
Immediately after the earthquakes struck Haiti, the Ushahidi team adapted the platform for crisis reporting and mapping for the area. Anyone in or outside of Haiti could use the tool via the web or on a mobile phone to make reports with voice, text or video; the reports were then mapped and sources verified. At the time of writing, nearly 1300 reports had been placed via SMS, and reports are still coming in. Those not in Haiti can also use the application as it aggregates news and actions to take.

Be sure to visit the site and press "Play" on the map. It will play back all the data to show you where reports came from each day so you can see how the actions on the ground changed over time.

Fundraising

Most people are already familiar with the American Red Cross and the speed with which they jumped into action after the January earthquakes. Within just three hours of the earthquakes hitting Haiti on January 12th, the Red Cross had set up a mobile fundraising mechanism that let people donate \$10 (or any other amount they wished) from their phone by sending HAITI to 90999. 100% of donations went directly to disaster relief. By the morning of the 14th, donations had already hit [\\$3 Million](#).

Updated numbers from last week show mobile donations at over \$31 Million!



The Red Cross wasn't just taking in mobile donations, it was leveraging the power of the web for information distribution, as well -- between those following the news and the organizations, relief workers on the ground and the services they were delivering, and more.

On the ground, the Red Cross focused on "food, clean drinking water and other relief items such as hygiene kits, blankets, tarps, sleeping mats, tents and water containers. The relief items are helping more than 10,000 families (50,000 people) to date -- with plans to increase this number. About 79 percent of the funds spent or committed by the American Red Cross have been for food and water; 18 percent have been for shelter; and the rest have been for health and family services." They've used their website, blog, Twitter and Facebook, Youtube and more to keep [telling the stories](#) of those in need, those they're serving, and how people watching the relief effort unfold can continue to contribute.

Missing Persons

[The Extraordinaries](#) launched a mobile application last year that lets users take advantage of moments of free time to volunteer via their phone. The application has more than 50 organizations contributing volunteer opportunities to over 6,000 users (with 35,000+ micro-tasks already completed).

Once the earthquakes shook Haiti, the team at The Extraordinaries went into action, creating ways for people to turn a few minutes into incredibly important volunteering. [The system](#) has three components:

- The Image Tagger -- Volunteers sort through news photos coming out of Haiti and categorize (tag) them with keywords like "adult, child, alive, deceased." Never before has there been a system that can bring together thousands of photos from across the web and have them sorted by live human beings (since no computer could know that there is a teenager in a photo).
- The Matcher -- They've engineered a system that matches faces of missing people to faces in news photos that we've sorted with the image tagger above. Volunteers look at a photo of a missing person, compare it to a news image, and see if they can find a match.
- The Search Engine -- As volunteers sort through images with the image tagger, they are fed into the Extras' "search engine". This system allows families to search through images taken post-earthquake in Haiti, and specify certain characteristics. For example, if a family is looking for their missing mother, they can use the search engine to find images that volunteers have tagged with "adult" and "female." Their mother might be in one of those photos.

Thousands of volunteers donated a time from their phones and computer screens to help reconnect families; 76,584 images were tagged, 8,137 news images collected, 746 possible matches found, and 24 matches close enough to contact families. It was a tremendous effort by the team and all the volunteers who donated time. The Extraordinaries are still analyzing their efforts and identifying ways to improve the system for future use, showing that every time you deploy your technology is a chance to learn and improve for the next time.

What's Changing?

What we often think of as "social media" has given way to a larger movement, known as the Real-Time Web. We interact with our friends and colleagues in real time on and offline -- either in the office or out at coffee, on Twitter or social networks. So, why shouldn't our information, data, actions, and search happen in real time as well? More and more, now we can.

What's more, we don't just expect to be able to learn what's happening as it happens, like having news and updates about aftershocks and relief teams on the ground, but we also want to be able to take action in real time (and see the effects of our actions to help out). This is why tools that work across platforms and take advantage of mobile phone access have become the stars of real-time: we can donate instantly from our phone, we can help find missing people while riding the bus to work. Organizations involved can quickly unleash the power of the crowd to help them in disaster relief at the same time they're providing food and water to those who have lost their homes.

You always get a bit of bad with the good, however, especially with the news and public attention of a disaster relief effort. The Haiti earthquakes were no exception. Scams and controversy emerged quickly, mainly because so many were taking advantage of the power of the real-time Web to get information and follow developments. Publicity, allegations, public statements and promises were all shared within the social media sphere -- [the examination process of Yele](#), the organization founded by Wyclef Jean, is a perfect example.

What the real-time Web has really changed is the way we are able to use the technology tools and systems we have in place, not our human processes. We have always felt compassion and an immediate call to action in times of need.

Now we have technology catching up with our responses times.

For more on the real-time Web check out the report Marshall Kirkpatrick, lead writer at ReadWriteWeb, recently authored called [The Real-Time Web and Its Future](#). (You can also [read an interview](#) with him discussing the impacts of the real-time Web on social impact organizations.)