

Wireless Communication Key During Disasters

With proper planning and contingency flows, new media can effectively be harnessed by an alert government for an alert citizenry at times of disasters.

What an awful month May was in Asia! Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, the earthquake in Chengdu in China, and terrorist bomb attacks in Jaipur in India. In all of these, wireless tools and technologies play a key role: SMS alerts to citizens, mobile news updates about disaster relief, contributing to funds via SMS, RFID tagging of medical and food supplies, and mesh/WiMax technologies "in a box" for emergency communications infrastructure.

In order to reassure people and to squelch false rumors, the Chinese government used SMS alerts to inform people that the areas where they live are not in the seismic zone (<http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/node/8831>). China Mobile partnered with the Red Cross Society of China to release an SMS donation platform on Tuesday (www.pacificepoch.com/newsstories/123327_0_5_0_M/).

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi launched the

Myanmar Cyclone Humanitarian Relief Fund, organised by Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM) in collaboration with the Foreign Ministry. Those who want to donate to the Myanmar fund can send via SMS the keyword "derma" (donation) followed by the amount, between RM1 and RM10, to the shortcode 32776 (<http://www.bernama.com.my/benama/v3/news.php?id=332612>).

And in Jaipur, of the several bodies that were brought to a hospital near the bomb blast sites, the mobile phones on three dead bodies started ringing. The doctors had to give the sad news of their deaths to their relatives on the mobiles phones being carried by the victims.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, WiMax solutions and Internet bridges were provided by companies like Motorola to provide wireless communications access in the devastated areas.

What do all these uses of emerging technologies mean for PR agencies, government planners, citizens and the media?

1. It is important for government agencies to work with the private sector (especially mobile operators) in working out strategies for using new media like mobile communications for warning citizens about national threats (natural and terrorist). Costs and operational details should be worked out in advance.
2. Companies should have regular access to their employees at all times via email or SMS, to warn them about pending disasters and also to monitor potential loss of life.
3. News media and disaster management agencies should work together to devise responsible means of alerting the public via traditional media as well as email or SMS or Web site updates, without causing panic or rumours.
4. Emerging trends in new media (eg. WiMax for wide-range broadband communications) should be tracked with an eye for the potential in disaster information flows.
5. Citizens from all walks of life should ensure that vital personal information and contact information for loved ones is stored on their handphones, for access during disasters.

With proper planning and contingency flows, new media can effectively be harnessed by an alert government for an alert citizenry at times of disasters.

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