

Position Paper: Electronic forums to speed information flow between professionals and citizen responders

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=== How can new technologies and approaches improve outcomes, reduce costs and/or improve response times for an emergency?

Electronic forums can help speed information flow between professionals and citizen responders. This already happens informally using platforms like SMS, Twitter, instant messaging, and social networks. Here are a couple of ways to make it work better:

- * The value of communications forums scales with the number of users. It's important that everybody is engaged in the same forums, including professional responders, groups like Community Emergency Response Teams, and ordinary citizens. To help this happen, we should:
 - * Study forums to learn which are most engaging, useful, trusted, and reliable in emergency response.
 - * Educate all types of users and encourage them to coordinate on using the best forums. We should also encourage use of open standards so information can flow between forums.
 - * Address shortfalls found in existing forums through technical or policy changes.
- * There is an enormous and largely untapped resource of people who are far away from a disaster site, but would like to help. With the right technology and processes, they could help with information flow. For example, they could:
 - * Act as 'assistant 911 operators', especially for SMS messages. This can include translating messages, annotating GPS information for places mentioned, asking clarifying questions, prioritizing requests, and forwarding them to the right responder organizations.
 - * Annotate positions of photos by correlating them with aerial imagery.
 - * Mark road blockages and other map changes based on incoming aerial imagery.

[Some of this occurred with Ushahidi and Open Street Map in response

to the Haiti earthquake.]

=== *If you were offered 10-15 minutes to give a short talk, what would it be?*

I would try to connect these ideas to after-action reports from Haiti and to my experience at major fire incidents in California.

=== *What are the most pressing business, process, organization and technical issues?*

For electronic forums in emergency response to have an impact, they must be:

- Engaging - Users must want to use them, and there must be a low bar to entry
- Useful - The forum must help people to get the information they need
- Trusted - Users must not be alienated by forum policies, for example on privacy
- Reliable - The forum must function under high load during the disaster

I see these as the key issues to be understood and addressed -- all of them have technological, process, and organizational components.

=== *What is the role of university research in this area?*

The obvious place to start is studying existing electronic forums to learn which are best engaging citizens in emergency response and where there are gaps to be filled.

=== *Do you want to propose and help run a new breakout group?*

There's already a breakout group that addresses this area well.

=== *What is the most important action the DMI can take?*

A small but positive step would be a (quarterly?) seminar series on disaster response, focused on bringing in practitioners, including folks like local government officials and CERT volunteers, to give accounts of their actual disaster experiences. I think this is important to help keep our research grounded.