

On-the-ground reporting

Using text message mashups to help solve world crises — and adding a little more freedom with each keystroke

By DORIAN BENKOIL | What if a people throughout a crisis zone could send text messages that save lives, secure international aid, and inform the world of their plight? Ushahidi can lay claim to all these noble goals.

The idea behind the social software mashup is deceptively straightforward: Use uncomplicated Internet applications to receive text messages from people inside the crisis area and locate them on a map alongside feeds of news reports. Show it all, aggregated, on a Web page. Also send out the information via text messages, so those on the ground can get relevant reports.

The project was born of the Kenyan crisis early last year, when, during elections, violence broke out leading to the deaths of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people. Well-known blogger and activist Ory Okolloh wrote in a blog post during the violence that it would be very useful if someone could help create a Google mashup of media reports. Erik Hersman, an American who grew up in Kenya and Sudan and is also a well-known tech blogger there, contacted Okolloh, then reached out to the tech community in Kenya and elsewhere. Okolloh, Hersman and others who joined launched the site then put out word, which spread quickly. People connected to Kenya sent the information around the world to each other and back into the danger zone. The website received hundreds of text messages and some 50,000 unique visitors in January and February. NGOs like the Red Cross started to take notice, and, Hersman suspects, apportion resources with the additional knowledge. One story told was that a group of 60 people trapped with a forest ranger reported having no food or water through the Ushahidi interface, and an NGO sent supplies and helped them get away. Meanwhile, deaths and



GAME CHANGER 09 CASE STUDY

Ushahidi

for redefining the ability of people to quickly communicate vital information for action. Unlike many citizen journalism initiatives, it dispenses entirely with the many-to-one model of information dissemination and instead makes it possible for many people to communicate relevant information to many people simultaneously. Created by young people during a crisis, it builds on low-cost, high-penetration existing technologies that foster participatory action into the future

atrocities were reported that could have otherwise gone unrecorded.

The goal of Ushahidi, Hersman says, is to decrease the impact of a crisis: “By crowdsourcing this crisis information, we hope to bring more data, information, from ordinary people on the ground, rather than just the top-down hierarchy of how disaster management was handled in the past, and how early warning was handled in the past as well.”

The site provides its software applications openly and has been adapted by Ushahidi and others to help record human rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, deforestation in Madagascar, attacks on foreigners in South Africa and “peace heroes” in East Africa. The Al-Jazeera news service is testing a prototype to report on strife during the recent Gaza conflict, and another test is being built to help Teachers Without Borders work with educators worldwide. Ushahidi, funded to date by some \$225,000 in foundation grants, has hired its first full-time developer and is moving this Spring from “alpha” to a more robust “beta” phase with applications for smartphones such as the iPhone, Google’s Android operating system and a standard known as J2ME that will work with any device that used GPRS, a common standard for cellphone networks.

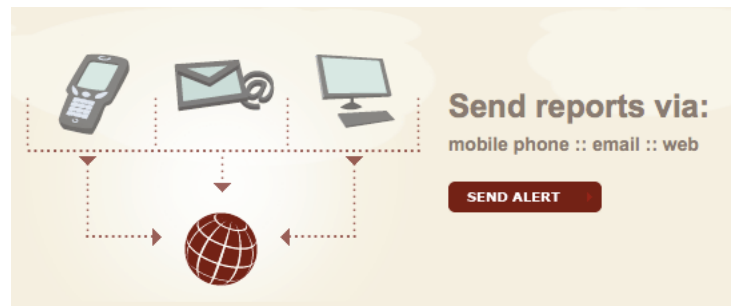
While he knows the site will have to cast a dispassionate eye to measure what good Ushahidi is doing for the money it receives, Hersman also thinks about the future possibilities. “What will happen when we get the greater ecosystem working in conjunction with Ushahidi -- more of these microblogging services [such as Twitter] and mobile phone networks?,” he asks. “It becomes even more exciting when you look beyond the digital environment in the U.S. and start plugging into the social networks that are used in other parts of the world.”

“I don’t know what the the future will be,” he adds. “But I think it will be very powerful.”

Ushahidi

www.usshahidi.com

Ushahidi means “testimony” in Swahili. When Kenya’s presidential elections turned to riots, killings and a media blackout, bloggers and techies there kicked into action to build a mobile news network in four days. They pumped information through friends and family living abroad, and then back throughout Kenya via mobile SMS. The effort changed the game for ordinary citizens, for crisis reporting in the developing world — and for authoritarians everywhere who hadn’t heard of We Media.



Users can submit alerts in three ways