

Reconstructing Haiti: a rapidly deployable citizen journalism network

Todd Huffman - Synergy Strike Force - HuffmanTM@gmail.com - 562-537-1320

We are proposing a rapidly deployed, several days until functional, citizen journalism network which leverages existing our contacts and infrastructure in the humanitarian aid and disaster response (HADR) in Haiti. We'll train and provide support to various individuals and groups as we aggregate multimedia from various groups across the country in addition to training and supporting our own collection teams. Locals have access and interest in the reconstruction of their country, and can provide transparency and accountability through low-cost media recording.

The key point is those affected by the disaster have the most stake in the reconstruction, and I want to use mobile tech to give them a voice we can hear.

Key Benefits of a Citizen Journalism Network in Reconstructing Haiti

- Transparency into reconstruction activities via:
 - Better knowledge of what problems matter to those affected
 - Remote views into areas not easily accessible by outsiders
- Improved security by increasing the view of those on the ground
- Allowing affected populations to have a voice in the reconstruction process
- Real-time reporting of of the reconstruction viewable at a global scale

Proposal

A team of two individuals will be sent in to Port au Prince to coordinate with local contacts -- primarily those in medical relief through Instedd and media through Reuters. The team members will bring in smart phones, cameras, and other recording devices, and arrange for training and support of local citizen journalists. The team will coordinate distribution of the reports inside and outside of the country. Aggregated reports will be put up on the publicly available via the Haiti Ushahidi project, Instedd, and Reuters. <http://haiti.ushahidi.com/>

Research Questions

Populations affected by HADR situations rarely have the mechanisms to engage dialog with the world around them due to pre-disaster issues of literacy, technology, economics and governance made worse with destabilization. It is in the best interests of outside entities operating around the population to enable a more direct voice in direct communications and in the media. Citizen journalism has the potential to promote non-violent dialog, legitimacy locally, nationally, and internationally, and better situational awareness. However, the best mechanisms for standing up citizen journalisms are not well established and must be explored before being integrated into comprehensive post-conflict or HADR response.

Key questions:

- How can issues of illiteracy or language barriers be minimized / overcome?
- What technological solutions can be realistically used in the field?
- How can areas with sparse technological infrastructure be engaged?
- How can the interaction be integrated into situational awareness strategies?
- How can a two-way dialog be managed with all the relevant entities?

Background and Strategy

A consistent problem in HADR is the affected population typically has no direct voice in international media. Reporting on the reconstruction come from outside observers, and are put through a variety of filters which do not serve the population directly. Consequences are wide-ranging - resulting in efforts not serving the needs of the locals, fraud as funds go to alternate interests, and on a globally can result in erosion of international support in the reconstruction process.

These efforts are an extension of our past performance as a team planning and deploying the AliveinAfghanistan.org project, which brought together approximately 250 reports on Election Day in August. The in-country impact is hard to estimate, but reports were anonymously provided to election monitoring teams who were being denied information by the government. Internationally the project was critically acclaimed; see this BBC article (<http://is.gd/4uJOW>). Our experience in citizen journalism, election coverage, and Afghanistan enables us to properly plan and implement this proposal.



Figure (1). A screen shot of the Alive in Afghanistan site, showing reports of violence, fraud, and election info on election day sent in via the web and SMS.

We've also prototyped reconstruction observation in Afghanistan, training local children on how to use digital recording media. In one instance we trained a local boy, Lutfullah Kamran, how to use a digital camera, e mail, and upload to YouTube. We sent him about to report on projects which were of interest to him. We were able to remotely instruct him to check in on the status of a well, and he uploaded video to Youtube of the well being operated by the locals. In another instance we turned an e mail of his into a blog post, which was picked up and published by the Huffington Post

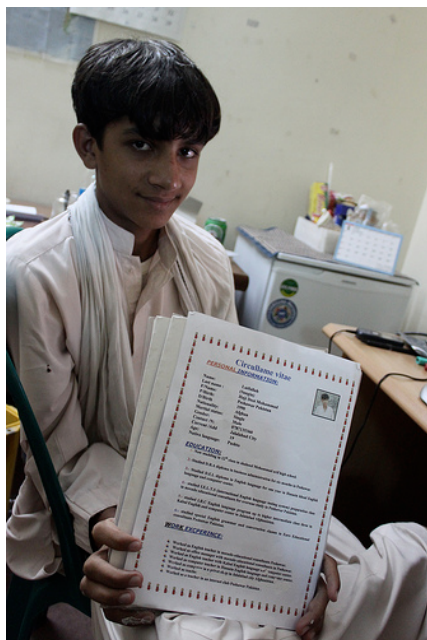
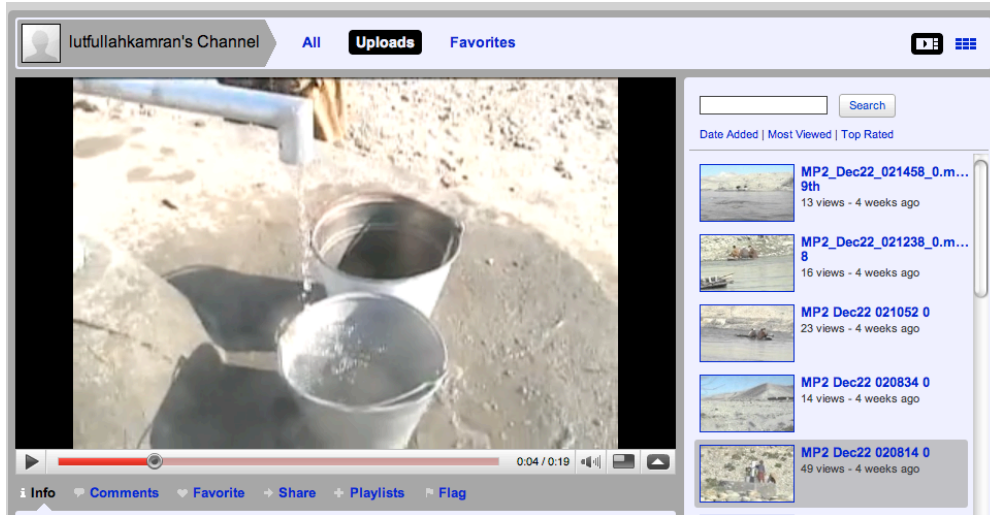


Figure (2). (top) A screen shot of Lutfullah's YouTube channel showing evidence of a reconstructed well functioning. (lower left) Lutfullah showing his school papers. (lower right) A screen shot of Lutfullah's opinion of electricity, corrected for grammar, on the Huffington Post.

Lutfullah's YouTube Channel:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/lutfullahkamran#p/u/4/t22H-AkurA4>

Lutfullah's Electricity E mail on Huffington Post:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wires/2009/08/19/much-of-afghanistan-strug_ws_262994.html

The purpose of this effort is to establish an innovative method for rapidly standing up a citizen journalism network in Haiti, as well as enable a sustainable journalism economy. A citizen journalism network can benefit a wide range of stakeholders: aid and reconstruction workers, policy and decision makers, media and the public, and most importantly the affected population. The infrastructural and technological design is oriented towards improving the international response efforts by focusing on key knowledge gaps which are difficult to fill through traditional media and information distribution methods.

A key component of the approach is utilizing new mobile 'smart phones' which are seeing the convergence of data capture, communication, and media consumption. The strategy replaces the need for multiple expensive devices (camcorders, cameras, audio recorders, laptops) which can total in the thousands of dollars with a single device which are sub-\$500. Smart phone based media collection, organization, and communication allows larger numbers of individual journalists to be equipped and trained for less cost.

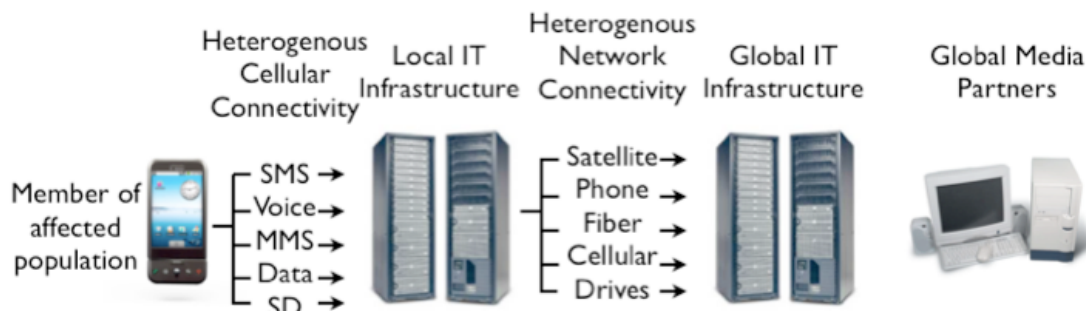


Figure (3). A flexible communications infrastructure architecture allows the media network to thrive in environments without solid connectivity.

Training is also a critical issue smart phones help address in terms of finding qualified individuals, rapid journalism specific training in the field, and continued training and feedback. Phones are a much more familiar technology in the developing world, and larger numbers of the affected population are likely to have the basic skills necessary to operate the technology. The consumer oriented user interface capabilities of smart phones, which are largely iconic and avoid extensive text interfaces, makes it easier to train for journalism specific skill sets. The phones can also be used as media consumption devices, and

continued training and feedback can take place remotely via content produced and pushed back down to the device.

Connectivity is often an issue in affected areas, and smart phones benefit from being able to engage through multiple methods. The media group can utilize the a variety of available methods across, SMS, MMS, voice, cellular, and wifi wireless methods, as well as physically transporting media using SD cards if no wireless connectivity is available. Local IT infrastructure will collect and manage content distribution in-country, and pass the information to a global network through whatever communication method that might be available, such as satellite, phone, fiber, cellular, or physical transport of hard drives.

The Team

The project is composed of several teams who collaborated before in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Team Lead - Todd Huffman

Todd has led mobile device projects in Afghanistan and in the US, and has considerable 'boots on the ground' experience in reconstructions. He will be training locals in Haiti and will be on the ground for approximately a week.

Mobile Development - Jason Rexilius - Hosted Labs

Jason was formerly a developer on mobile systems at Motorola, and started a grid computing and software-as-a-service company, Hosted Labs. He will be going in with Todd to establish the IT infrastructure necessary to support the project.

Reachback Support - Dr Dave Warner - Synergy Strike Force

Dr Warner has extensive HADR experience, coordinating medical communication and responses in Afghanistan, Katrina, Iraq, Banda Aceh and more. He will be advising before and during the response and coordinating remotely where needed.

Reachback Support - Luke Beckman - Instedd

Luke is the National Response Liaison for Instedd, providing reachback support for Dr Eric Rasmussen who is currently on the ground in Port au Prince. Luke has the connections to enable the project to rapidly contextualize and stand up, and will be advising from the US.

Geospatial Data Support - FortiusOne

FortiusOne produces a web based GIS system and is heavily involved in the GIS response in Haiti, and supported previous efforts in Afghanistan. They'll be providing geospatial processing and visualization.