Technology and Disaster:
The Case of Haiti and the Rise of
Text Message Relief Donations

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Abstract

On January 12, 2010, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake tore apart Haiti. The horror and devastation wreaked on the country was called the worst disaster the international body has ever had to deal with, resulting in more than twice as many deaths as any previous magnitude-7.0 event. While service providers were running into many barriers, an unusual development occurred with the unprecedented scale of donations for relief efforts. The use of text messages to donate money from cell phone bills to designated charities was significant. In this manner, anyone with a mobile phone could donate whenever, within moments.

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Haiti:

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devastation wreaked on the country was called the worst disaster the international body has ever
had to deal with, resulting in more than twice as many deaths as any previous magnitude-7.0
event[1]. Many factors worked together to create such destruction, including pre-existing abject
poverty and heavy losses sustained by organizational quarters and facilities, including such
crucial bodies as the Haitian Ministry of Public Health and Population, who then met in a
cramped set of rooms above a generator retailer[2]. Relief efforts were wrought with numerous
challenges too extensive to discuss in their entirety in this analysis, however the point is
important. Water, electricity, communications, roads, and the port remained either non-existent
or severely disrupted. Over a million were left homeless[3], and thousands of others trapped in the
wreckage.

While services were running into many barriers, a unique development occurred with the
unprecedented scale of donations for relief efforts. A significant component to this is a result of
the use of text messages to donate money from cell phone bills to designated charities. In this
manner, anyone with a mobile phone could donate whenever, within moments. This was
augmented by the fact the people were encouraged to send money rather than material donations.

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[1] Bilham, "Lessons from the Haiti earthquake."
[2] Dowell, Tappero, and Frieden, "Public Health in Haiti — Challenges and Progress.."
[3] Yates and Paquette, "Emergency knowledge management and social media technologies."

Logistics were difficult getting critical needs on the ground, even by trained organizations and experts. Funds were encouraged in order to support the identified needs by relief personnel, rather than unnecessary donations. Medical crews with little experience of working in developing nations were urged to stay home and donate money for the time being as well[4]. Citizens were continued to be encouraged to donate, emphasizing a system of tax deductibility and incentives with the HAITI Act accelerating income tax returns[5].

In text donations, such as for the American Red Cross, a person types a code such as 90999 and then types "HAITI" to donate a preset amount of $10. The user then gets a text back asking that they confirm the donation. After a confirmation, the person receives a text saying "Thanks! $10 charged to your phone bill for Red Cross Int'l Relief." The concept is similar to that of buying cell-phone ringtones or coupons. The mobile giving program was established within hours of the earthquake and widely publicized in the following months, including such events as the SuperBowl[6].

The Red Cross campaign was also given added legitimacy by endorsements from Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and the White House's blog about the unfamiliar mode of giving[7]. Within days they had received over $3million through Short Message Service (SMS) and $32 million within the month, whereas they had raised only $190,000 through SMS donations in all of 2009. Many other charities besides the Red Cross rushed to promote cellphone campaigns. A second popular program utilizing mobile fundraising was Haitian-born musician Wyclef Jean. He used his Twitter account to raise money for his foundation, raising over a million. His campaign charged $5 with each text for relief efforts. The incredible implication of

[4] Devi, "Helping earthquake-hit Haiti."
[5] Sherlock, "Charitable Contributions for Haiti's Earthquake Victims."
[6] American Red Cross, *Red Cross Raises More than $32 Million vi aMobile Giving Program*.
[7] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."

these numbers can be seen by the fact that over 3 million people donated through text message alone.

Convenience is one factor in the campaign's success. People simply send a text and the payment is routed effortlessly through their bill. Some service providers were even encouraging donations by waiving the cost of the text message. mGive, the organization facilitating the text donations to the Red Cross, also committed to not charge its usual fees in the case of Haiti, so that all the money would go to Red Cross[8]. Similarly, several major credit card companies announced they would waive transaction fees for some charitable donations to relief efforts[9]. Mobile giving is appealing for disasters such as the earthquake because it can be set up quickly and donors can be mobilized and give immediately. The editor of The Chronicle of Philanthropy describes the transformation as "mobile's so versatile, anyone can do it anywhere. It allows someone to see a problem and deal with it right away, fast.[10]"

Expanding awareness of the new way to give, social media websites were also central to the massive response. Social media sites across the board were filled with messages about the efforts. People like being able to post a message and show their contribution, as well as motivate others to do so as well in an increasingly social society. Estimates suggest that more than 280 million Americans use cell phones. From June 2007 to June 2008, Americans sent a total of 600 billion text messages. The reason for using this method among donors is clear in the sheer volume of prospective new donors and for users it means instant gratification. Ultimately, it appears that people want to give. They are able to have an impact without waiting for the

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Haq, "In Haiti, Red Cross, Wyclef Jean change charity a text at a time."

government or anyone else to do it first. They can organize friends and colleagues to donate without the logistics; they are able to obtain easy access through their cell phone.

Challenges:

While it takes just a minute to donate via text message, the actual money transfers can take awhile. "What people may not realize is that it could take up to 90 days before the money actually reaches the charity. We're advising people to follow up that $10 donation by going to the Web sites and donating directly.[11]" While people were widely encouraged to text for Haiti relief, the money can't be routed from most U.S. wireless carriers to relief efforts until cell phone users pay their phone bills[12]. Given the acute stage of such an emergency, this money would not be fast enough to address staggering critical needs of the victims. There is also the consideration as to whether this mentality of having to "re-give" in order to ensure arrival of the funds might deter donors. Cell phone carriers and mGive said they were working to accelerate the flow of funds[13]. A spokesman from Verizon noted that the company was working on a system that would advance the contributions[14]. After the first week, they advanced $3million of the pledged $8million by customers, and $15million of $32million pledged had been received by the Red Cross after the first month[15]. This however, cannot be expected to be a sustainable solution by "fronting" the money, nor would it be possible for all providers, such as those with lower cash reserves or even by larger ones on a regular basis.

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[11]Art Taylor, president of the Better Business Bureau Wise Giving Alliance, Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."

[12] Mollenkamp, "Americans Pledge Millions, but Cash Flow Takes Weeks."

[13] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."

[14] Ibid.

[15] American Red Cross, *Red Cross Raises More than $32 Million vi aMobile Giving Program*.

Caution was also expressed that the urge to give could provide opportunities for scammers. "Even with Web sites, people should be careful to ensure they're giving to the charity they intend to[16]." The FBI warned Americans "to ignore unsolicited emails and to be skeptical of individuals representing themselves as surviving victims.[17]"

Disaster fundraising has a tendency to reward organizations for their marketing skills and name recognition as much if not more than for the scope, relevance and quality of their emergency services. For example, before the earthquake, the Red Cross had 15 people working in Haiti on projects such as malaria prevention and measles vaccines. Partners in Health had more than 700 doctors and nurses among a staff of almost 5,000 operating a hospital and multiple clinics in the country. Despite this, Red Cross received nearly $200million in donations while Partners in Health only about $40million[18]. In many cases, this can be attributed to the fact that donors lack the knowledge or ability to choose another reliable or relevant organization. Name brand organizations, so to speak, at minimum carry legitimacy simply by longevity and previous endorsements. This of course, does not mean these indicators don't have value. Typically, when programs don't work, they simply fail. Particularly in recent years, there have been greater moves towards business-type models as well as merging organizations[19].

While the idea of pooling fundraising is appealing, it too presents challenges. In the U.S. there are many more organizations than in say, Britain or Canada, as well as a more fragmented media. Other questions being raised include issues of time and cost of adding another layer between the donor and recipient. Particularly in the case of emergencies, the delaying or minimizing of allocated funds due to transactions is counter-productive to the extent of costing

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[16] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."
[17] Mollenkamp, "Americans Pledge Millions, but Cash Flow Takes Weeks."
[18] Strom, "Haiti Crisis Prompts Fresh Talk of Pooling U.S. Relief Money."
[19] Feldman, "Philanthropy."

lives. Besides these questions, there are also issues of how the resources will be divided, among which organizations, and who will be making the decisions. Pooling funds has been used in Europe and Canada, although there still remain traces of the same challenges by those that feel that funds should have been distributed differently[20]. Peter Bell, former chief executive of the American arm of CARE aptly sums up the idea as "you do see, in the response to the Haiti catastrophe and other recent disasters, some elements of joint fundraising coming together, but it is a very complex issue here, where organizations are programmed to compete for dollars.[21]"

Is This New?

The Red Cross has also solicited text-message donations as part of other relief efforts, with Hurricane Ike being the next largest recipient, though none had caught on like the efforts for Haiti[22]. Following the 9/11 attack, there was a dramatic increase noted in online donations[23]. In the first two weeks, The American Red Cross reported that online donations accounted for almost 30% of the total at $60million. Previously, the most money ever raised by a charity online in a single year was $2.7million by the Red Cross in 1999. After 9/11, issues of volume on major sites became a huge problem, for which hasty solutions were implemented. This set the foundations for future capacities for the expected rush of digital giving immediately post-disasters. The use of the internet for charitable giving would only increase. Email and online campaigning also became a critical tool during this period. Lessons learned from 9/11 incorporated a general awareness of the extraordinary potential for online donations, including organizations not directly involved in relief efforts. These methods could be seen applied throughout the charitable community. During this period, banner announcements on websites

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[20] Strom, "Haiti Crisis Prompts Fresh Talk of Pooling U.S. Relief Money."
[21] Ibid.
[22] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."
[23] Wallace, "Online Giving Soars as Donors Turn to the Internet Following Attacks."

was a new concept[24]. The concept was novel, to run advertisements about local charities,

particularly during notable periods, such as for a homeless shelter around Thanksgiving time.

Interestingly, there were those that doubted the effects of 9/11 on online giving would have any

implications for non-relief organizations[25]. The question could thing be posed as to whether the

expansion now of text donations can be viewed in the same expansion model.

In another case, the initial response to the Indonesian Tsunami was a handful of bloggers.

This subsequently grew into a global community, which coordinated responses and resources for

future emergencies. These responses are also seen with the Sichuan Earthquake in China in 2008,

the Yushu Earthquake in 2010 and the largest response to Haiti[26] as well as others.

The concept of SMS fundraising took form in the U.S. in 2004, with pioneers such as the

Mobile Giving Foundation[27] and the Mobile Accord[28]. The use of mobile fundraising however,

had already been in use in Europe. Since then, the mobile giving has taken off and continues to

expand its uses. The accuracy and speed provided by text messages has been identified as being

particularly valuable for the health field[29]. In fact, an entire field has grown around the use of

mobile phones and text messages, called mHealth. While this does not necessarily relate directly

to fundraising, the uses for cell phones are being identified and used in the field. Its impact in

gathering donations in an emergency is clearly extensive. Since the role of mobile phones

continues to grow within the health field, it would follow that the same reasons that make it so

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Bedford and Faust, "Role of online communities in recent responses to disasters: Tsunami, China, Katrina, and Haiti."
[27] Haq, "In Haiti, Red Cross, Wyclef Jean change charity a text at a time."
[28] mGive, "About Us."
[29] Holmen, "TXTING4HEALTH."

beneficial to disease compliance and monitoring would also be idea for emergency settings as well as fundraising.

The fact is, the breadth of the field is only just being realized since being identified and widely used within the last decade. Technology is near impossible to predict and stay ahead of. For example, only a few years ago, a cell phone implied one-to-one communication between two people. With the development of smart phones, cell phones have now effectively become mobile computers increasing their capacity exponentially. As the function of the phone expands, so has the market of people using them. What was fanciful a few years ago in terms of what a mobile device could do, is now becoming standard in the western world, while the capacity to use phones by global populations has proliferated. As of 2009 there were 2.4 billion mobile phone users worldwide, with between 49% and 80% actively using text messaging on a regular basis, depending on the region[30]. Given the growth rate of cell phone users in the last couple years, one can imagine the numbers today. Previously, text messages had begun being used in emergency situations in the U.S., including sending readings and data ahead to the hospital. It has also been used by the CDC to notify threatened populations of disease outbreaks in developing nations or used in an effective smoking-cessation campaign in the U.S.[31]. Texts have also been used to assure compliance with TB drug regimes as well as HIV/AIDS awareness and provision of information in Africa. Thus, while the concept of using text messages to support programs is not new, the scale and utility is just beginning to be explored.

The Future of Mobile Fundraising:

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

Today, we are no longer seeing the drawn out telethons, but rather concise campaigns that are short enough for Twitter. "There is an enormous outpouring for this effort. It's such an easy way to give and pass around through social sites," stated Wendy Harman, social media manager at the Red Cross[32]. The cell phone campaign has reached people who might not otherwise have made the effort to get involved[33]. With over 3 million mobile donors, the effect is clear. Now not only donations, the Red Cross has also created a free application for cell phones so that users can "read the latest developments in the recover, see first-hand what it is like in the devastation Caribbean nation through American Red Cross photo essays, and learn about what other Red Cross societies from around the globe are doing to help the people of Haiti.[34]"

From the beginning, philanthropy experts speculated that the text-messaging approach could have a lasting impact on the charity world[35]. With a significant drop in university donations[36], it will remain to be seen what the impact of Haiti and text donations will be on charitable giving as a whole. While a larger pool of donors now exists after Haiti, the question will be whether that motivation came simply from marketing, simplicity, and the relatively minimal expense, or whether more people are committing to charitable giving. On the other hand, it will be interesting to observe whether the new tactic for relief organizations can extend to universities and non-emergency charities.

An important issue however, particularly in consideration of where research, social tools, and technology has been and how far it has gone, is the ethical considerations attached. This can be seen with immediate relevancy with social media sites, privacy concerns emerge in a new

[32] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."
[33] Ibid.
[34] American National Red Cross, "New Apps Let Mobile Phone Users Help, Stay Informed About Haiti."
[35] Wortham and Richtel, "Burst of Mobile Giving via Cellphone Text Messages Adds Millions in Relief Funds."
[36] Lewin, "Sharp Drop Is Seen in Gifts To Colleges and Universities.."

public realm. As information sharing grows, so does the demand for accountability while also maintaining a right to privacy. Even text message donations, by dealing with financial transactions can illuminate ethical dilemmas as well as concern over accuracy and accountability. The developed world has become a contradiction between being social with people around the world that are in fact strangers, while demanding privacy at home (though of course, this has also clearly been seen with the increased participation by populations concerning relief and donations). While this is not meant as critical, it aims simply to point out the likelihood of potential discord associated with a future no longer requiring face-to-face interaction and the associated consequences. Ethical questions could be discussed at length and may not even lead to an answer. The nuances of such speculation and reflection however, are beyond the capacity of this review.

The incredible popularity of the text message donation programs following the Haiti Earthquake highlights both the power of magnitude of donated funds, as well as the associated limitations. In effect, the duration of disbursing mobile donation money to the recipients more closely resembles that of traditional telethons that needed to wait for the actual check to arrive. The spread of information and the immediacy of commitment however are significantly faster. Social media was also highlighted during this event, which has been shown to be, when properly employed, a "faster decision cycle and more complete knowledge resources.[37]"

A consideration on the use of text messages in the future will be of mitigating the existing challenges as well as adaptation with technological development. As the use of cell phones expands, shortly behind that will be the global expansion of internet, then smart phones. The capacity for mobile relief needs to be prepared for this development. In the mean time, the

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[37] Yates and Paquette, "Emergency knowledge management and social media technologies."

identification of its uses must continue to be explored, and existing strategies adapted to wider uses. Similar to the period immediately following 9/11, fears spread that online fundraising would replace traditional methods. Experts then maintained that successful strategies would be the ones integrating internet-based strategies with traditional methods[38]. This holds true today. In the case of Haiti, while the value attached to donations via text message is astounding, particularly considering its accumulation in $10 increments, the total amount is still less than a third of all donations. The advise from a decade ago remains relevant, that integration of new and old methods is the best strategy to achieve optimal results and ease adaptation in the future.

As the digital age continues to advance, the younger generations not only learn to effectively use social media and mobile technology, but also depend on it. Traditional methods become obsolete by being too slow or too formal, when action demands immediate response and results. Services and communication are moving toward being "real-time", all the time. Convenience is a premium among Americans. Hospitals are able to remind patients of appointments via text, or even help them lose weight as with Lindora Comprehensive Weight Control[39]. Considering existing technology and the advancements made this decade, it is not unreasonable to expect a geographic/location-sensitive component to emerge in the future. Or, data-aware programs may become increasingly sensitive to non-preset messages, or yes or no responses. Perhaps a similar system of spam email will develop with text messages. Maybe all of the above. Ultimately, technology invariably grows exponentially, meaning the more it advances, the more its capacity will be able to manage: all at once. For now, it is easy to acknowledge the considerable impact mobile fundraising had on the disaster in Haiti. Millions of dollars were raised and millions of people were involved. While clear challenges still exist, a look into the

[38] Hart, "ePhilanthropy."
[39] Holmen, "TXTING4HEALTH."

historical context hints at a future of rapid development. The goal in the end, is to mitigate

suffering and consequences in emergencies and help its victims.

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