

Philanthropy and Tragedy in Haiti: A New Era Brings New Ways to Help

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It will take years to fully recover from the 7.0 magnitude earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12. Along the way, a tremendous amount of resources will be required to help heal the injured, rebuild infrastructure, and provide general relief and services. As with many natural disasters before, both large- and small-scale organizations are already on the ground, trying to create order in chaos and help restore impacted areas to functional.

What makes the response to this tragic event different is the utilization of new media to help organize efforts and, perhaps even more importantly, raise funds to support the work that needs to be done. Asking for help is inevitable when tragedy strikes; new tools, however, are making it is even easier to participate.

Perhaps nothing has had as immediate an impact over the last few days as mobile text messaging. Communication via text has been a critical element of sharing information and raising funds.

Within 36 hours, [over \\$3 million dollars](#) was collected in the United States by the Red Cross (an individual can simply text the word "HAITI" to 90999). [Yéle](#), an organization set up by musician Wyclef Jean, has also used the approach of SMS donations (\$5 can be donated by texting "YELE" to 501501). This type of effort has been in existence for several years, with organizations like [MobileGiving.org](#) establishing the process for a [wide array of charities](#) to receive donations via SMS text messaging.

This disaster will likely be a turning point for SMS donation opportunities, and with more than 280 million Americans possessing a cell phone, we should anticipate that this avenue for supporting a specific cause will grow exponentially in the coming year.

[Twitter](#), the popular [microblogging](#) service, has also been a tremendous source of information regarding the earthquake aftereffects. Search for the hashtag [#haiti](#) and you will find yourself in a sea of tweets from individuals organizations. The information ranges from first person accounts (including pictures), detail on relief efforts, donation details, news, reactions, and conversations on how to help.

As evidence of how mainstream media has embraced this tool, one needs to look no further than Ann Curry ([@AnnCurry](#)), an NBC news correspondent. An avid user of Twitter, she has been [actively soliciting local](#) individuals for interviews.

[Facebook](#), the second most visited website in the world, also carried news and avenues to donate funds for relief efforts. Not long after the earthquake hit, user

status updates were alight with reactions, reports on friends/family, and links to donate. Oftentimes this has included the abovementioned mobile donation opportunities.

In addition to monetary donation efforts, new media is being actively leveraged to collect and distribute information on logistics, response efforts, threats to security, and knowledge in real time. An example of this is [Ushahidi](#), a website developed to provide a platform for anyone to distribute data via SMS, email or web and visualize it on a map or timeline. The project was initially developed in response to post-election violence in Kenya in 2008, and has since evolved to become an ongoing effort to aggregate information from the public for use in crisis response.

Within 24 hours of the quake, Ushahidi had set up a [website](#) open to anyone to compile information on response efforts, logistics, survivor news, safety threats, and other emergent data. Information can be submitted via text message, email, Twitter, or an online [form](#). [HealthMap](#), a project out of the MIT Media Lab that uses a similar open source [geotagging](#) approach, is [currently showing health related alerts](#), soliciting input via phone, twitter, email, or their [website](#).

The above is a brief but powerful display of how technology has influenced our response to world events. Creativity combined with new media has accomplished the feat of shortening the distance between a private citizen's desire to help and the ability to do so by leveraging familiar tools and creating mechanisms to instantly connect and support. In this way, individuals have the opportunity to play a greater role in ongoing relief efforts.

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