

CrisisCamp and Aid Information Challenge

I haven't blogged for a while. It's not that I've forgotten how to write, more that I've been assimilating a huge amount of information whilst doing something that I've wanted to do for years but not known how to: using my computer science skills to make a positive difference in the world.

I'm not sure how it happened, but I think it went something like this. I moved close enough to London to visit it in the evenings. I found the girl geek and women in technology communities, went to their evening sessions and joined their email groups. That got me a reserved-for-girls ticket to my first barcamp (London Guardian). Which got me connected to the electronics hackers and, via my second barcamp (Brighton), to the Brighton Robotics crowd. I signed up to the organisers list for my third barcamp (London IBM) but just too late to help; I'm now signed up to organise what should be my fourth barcamp (London again) unless I sneak on in before it happens. In-between, I ended up helping organise the first PresentationCamp (a barcamp with a large non-techie contingent, in the toastmasters). And having done that, when Spike got wind of an idea to organise a camp to help Haiti, and do it in less than a week, it just seemed natural to get involved. Which is how I've ended up spending every Saturday in January and February, then once a month at a camp trying to build the bridge between the people with the tech skills and energy, and people with desperate needs, via a host of aid agencies and other camp organisers.

Which is hard work. Before I get to a camp I have to have a set of projects ready for people to work on, a set of people to receive those projects who know what they want/ need and are prepared to wait for it, and a set of people who feel happy and comfortable to work on those projects. And since this thing is in its infancy, there's a lot of bridge-building and trying to get my head around just what exactly we're trying to do with it. Which is how I ended up at the Aid Information Challenge (AIC2010), back at the Guardian offices again.

I couldn't stay for the whole day, but it gave me a huge amount to think about. I learnt about JSON and visualisation formats (I haven't learnt anything seriously technical at CrisisCamp for a while now); I got involved in a project that by the end of the day had 5 different outputs, all great ideas that people just sat down, worked out and got on with. I'd say that there's no project trace to speak of, but that wasn't the point: someone else can capture all the good stuff and put that in later. And it's finally hit me: **I'm** that "someone else". I know from barcamp organising that barcamps are fun, free, flexible events that just make themselves happen (but just happen to have a huge amount of advance, on-the-day and post-day organisation that makes that free-and-easy feel possible). But right now I seem to be carrying a lot of weight (and the extra coding burden between camps if it's needed) and I have a lot to learn from these other organisations still.