

Whither crismapping?

[Cross-posted from OpenCrisis.org]

Crisismapping has never been just about Twitter feeds; it's always been about data. But what data, and how do we know what's useful? I've been looking back over 4 years of archived data to start answering that one.

In truth, I've been having a bit of an identity crisis. I see all the "big data" work on social media feeds, and although I can swing an AWS instance and the NLTK toolkit like a data nerd, for me personally, that's not where the value of crismapping has been.

It's been about the useful, actionable data, and about connecting the people who have it with the people who need it. And whilst some of that data lies hidden in Twitter streams and Facebook requests, most of it is already on people's servers and hard drives, often in formats that can't be combined or understood easily.

So, some first things that make a difference every time:

- Rolodexes: knowing which response groups to follow, and who's likely to bring what helps. 3Ws are part of this – but before the 3W (who's doing what where) is the "who's".
- GIS data: knowing where medical facilities, schools, roads, bridges are makes a difference. Knowing what communications is available is important, so also knowing where cell towers are helps, but might be too coarse-grained: using signal maps to know which areas have cell coverage is often more useful. For me, mapping cell towers is problematic for the same reason that mapping military bases is problematic: they're both potential sources of help in a crisis, but they're both critical infrastructure whose locations are potentially sensitive information. But many maps include them (e.g. open signal map).
- Demographics. Very useful data, but finding even population counts at sub-country levels can be difficult. They're usually there (except perhaps in countries like DR Congo where surveying is difficult) but finding the "there" can be hard. I'd add technology and social media use to demographics, because there's no point sniffing Twitter if only 0.5% of the country (and mainly expats) use it – there used to be sites available that listed, e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc percentages in each country, but they all seem to be behind paywalls now.

After that, it's the emerging data: the 3Ws, the situation reports (both official, via news sources and on social media), the field notes about what's happening.

We also now have 4 years of historical crisis data collected and collated by volunteers, often in areas prone to repeated crises, on top of the data already available through organisations and

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groups that existed before crismapping was a "thing". I'm not entirely sure what the value of that data is to the next crisis (like wars, every crisis is subtly different), but it's certainly worth working that out.