

Writing an Ignite Talk

Oh grief, I've had posts stuck in my blogs list for a year now, but here's one that I wrote last year, as part of a campaign to get more non-academics to speak at crisismapping conferences.

An ignite talk is 5 minutes' talk with 20 slides that change automatically every 15 seconds. Giving ignite talks is a skill, and one that can be learnt. With the ICCM ignite deadline coming up soon, OpenCrisis thought that a) an ICCMxVirtual event for people who can't travel to Nairobi would be good, and b) non-academic mappers could do with some help creating ignite talks. We're talking about training sessions, but in the meantime, here's what works for me.

- Start with a story. Mappers have great stories, but they're often too modest ("who, me?") or too scared of presenting to tell them. Here are some stories that could be told from a mapper's perspective, to help other groups understand us: a deployment you enjoyed, and why; a technology you'd really like built (and why), good...
- Sketch out the story. I do this literally, with a piece of paper and pen, or with a set of slide headings.
- Start finding and making images that relate to the story. Use a screen-grabber. Look at your maps, your data, your messages, your links, your notes (being careful not to disclose any sensitive data, of course).
- Start writing paragraphs to match the images. Some images will take more than 15 seconds – that's okay, because you can either repeat the image, zoom into the relevant part of it, or ...
- At this point, you'll realize that things need to be tweaked. That's okay. That's supposed to happen. If you try to write something perfect first time, you'll fail (NB I edited this blogpost several times). But if you get the basic framework together and start getting materials, your story will start to emerge. Encourage it!
- Start talking... read your paragraphs out aloud... make a recording of it (you can do this from powerpoint, which can also advance your slides for you!), and listen to yourself speak (if you're shy, video is a no-no: it's terrible watching yourself, but not so bad to listen). Edit again.
- Keep talking... find someone to practice on, who'll make notes as you talk. Ask them what the 3 biggest messages they got from your talk were. Ask them what the 3 biggest messages should have been. Rewrite your paragraphs to emphasis these; it's okay to use silence in an ignite talk, and using it around a big message can be a very powerful thing to do.
- Now you have a talk. Practice it... and as you practice, start highlighting the key points in your text (I use bold font for this). If you're nervous like me, having those key points in a paper in your hand can make all the difference between freezing up completely, and having a way to restart your talk so nobody notices.
- Finally... the talk. Get out there, tell that story, and most of all remember that this isn't a judgement of your message or your style - it's a conversation between you and the

audience that you get 5 uninterrupted minutes to start. Then take a deep breath and go continue that conversation - in person, online, wherever your audience takes you.