Case study: Radio 1 and family reunification

Radio 1 is one of the biggest radio stations in Haiti. It broadcasts nationwide and online to a diaspora audience. The station also has an international landline. It was one of the few largely undamaged by the January 12th earthquake. In particular, the Internet connection survived. One of the first staff members to go back to the station in the hours after the disaster was music manager and DJ Carel Pedre, a well-known Haitian broadcaster and social media enthusiast with a strong Facebook presence and a Twitter feed followed by thousands. Prior to arriving at the station Carel had been taking pictures of the destruction and had posted them on his Twitter feed along with English and Kreyol updates. As a result, he had been contacted by international media and began giving interviews from the station via Skype, which he also simultaneously broadcast live.

Carel’s visibility on international media and broadcasts on Radio 1 indicated to his listeners that he was alive and the station was functional. As a result, Radio 1 was besieged by listeners (especially those with family outside the capital) wanting to share their stories, announce they were alive or broadcast appeals for information. In addition, Carel also began receiving hundreds of messages from across Haiti and overseas on his Facebook page and Twitter feed, asking for his help in locating friends and family.

To respond, Carel set up a multi-platform information system capable of consolidating all incoming requests. He then attempted to respond to them and share information with his audiences in a systematic manner. The system involved four friends with laptops all logged into his Facebook page and Twitter feeds, compiling requests and responding to messages. This was in addition to a team of producers interviewing all those arriving at the station (an average of 50 an hour) to take down details and decide who would go on air. Each day, the compiled list of people being sought was given to the office courier who went out on his motorbike to earthquake-affected areas, returning each evening with as much information as he could find. The team then simultaneously uploaded this information to Facebook, relayed it on Twitter and broadcast it on the airwaves.

Carel himself was acutely aware of the responsibility involved in handling this kind of information and the need for accuracy. He recalls, “There was so much information that was inaccurate, and so many rumours. I had the US embassy following me, the rescue teams – I had to make sure what I was saying was the truth because it was my Facebook account, my Twitter, my name and my reputation on everything. I had to invent a system, so I made a rule that I double checked everything unless it came from someone I really trusted.” In response people began sending phone numbers he could call to get more details or check facts.

Within days, the requests and information coming in started to expand: people were sending messages wanting to know how to get trucks or gasoline, to ask for help freeing someone trapped,
and institutions such as orphanages were appealing for help. Carel and his team did their best to manage and direct these requests for help, becoming in the process a wider clearing house for information. Carel remembers an orphanage that said they had 50 children – he called them to verify, found their location on Google Earth and then tweeted the GPS coordinates and requests, generating a response from one of the international Red Cross organisations.

Eighteen days after the earthquake a friend who was working as a fixer for Greek journalists called to say that they had found someone alive under the rubble of a hotel. As he was a friend, Carel tweeted the information along with the latitude and longitude of the location. The German Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team responded, and Carel passed them his friend’s number. In the meantime, the Greek journalists had also called a Greek USAR team. The man was rescued alive.