Case study: ENDK and the feedback system

Very early on in the project the team working on ENDK realised that some kind of system for audience feedback, and to enable listeners to ask questions, was essential. This was especially important in an environment where travelling to earthquake-affected areas near the office was so difficult.

Journalists going to the camps for ENDK were finding that survivors were desperate to ask questions about assistance, questions to which the journalists had no answers. The team decided to set up a phone number that listeners could SMS (there wasn’t sufficient capacity to handle calls). The system initially ran off a simple handset that was programmed only to accept incoming calls, and a local SIM card.

Interestingly, even experienced humanitarian communication professionals had reservations about establishing such a system. “My first concern is that it would collapse, it wouldn’t be able to handle the volume, and the second was that we wouldn’t be able to address any of the issues because we had no way to do it. And initially it did overwhelm our capacity and expectations – but it felt great. We knew people were really listening out there and they really wanted to participate.”

In the first 24 hours the ENK hotline received more than 800 SMS messages. It was clear that a more systematic approach was necessary. “We said OK, now what are we doing with this information?” said the humanitarian liaison staff member at the time. “Let’s find some common lines and common questions and that’s when we created the mailbox.” SMSs now come directly into a software system on a computer and are automatically logged and fed into a searchable database. The concept behind the mailbox was to enable the team to select a minimum of three questions each day that represented concerns of listeners, so journalists could follow up with relevant humanitarian or government bodies and broadcast the answers. It was hugely popular. However, it soon became clear that management of the system was a full-time job, as even an automated system needed human analysis to make overall assessments and value judgements. This task is now the responsibility of a dedicated staff member.

The data collected from this system feeds into ENDK’s overall research arm as part of the methodology for mapping on-going audience information needs and concerns. As this data comes from a self-selecting group (those who choose to spend money on the SMS) it is not a representative audience sample. The research team is therefore cautious about how they use the data, but from the earliest days the newsroom has found it extremely useful in guiding and making editorial decisions. The analysis has also been widely shared with the humanitarian community.

ENDK stands for Enformasyon Nou Owe Konnen (Kreyol for ‘News You Can Use’) – a daily humanitarian news and information programme produced by media development organisation, Internews.
“The mailbox is now the most popular item in our broadcasts. Even now, over a year later, we receive more than 150 text messages and emails’ a day. People everywhere, even Haitians living abroad, they write to us on email or send us SMS to ask questions about a whole range of topics,” says the current ENDK editor.