

A group photo of Digital Humanitarian Network team

DIGITAL HUMANITARIAN NETWORK

2014 Nominet Trust 100 Winner

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2014

A VOLUNTEER CORPS TO PROCESS BIG DATA IN DISASTER RESPONSE

Project URL: digitalhumanitarians.com

Project Twitter: [@Digihums](https://twitter.com/Digihums)

Organisations Involved Digital Humanitarian Network digitalhumanitarians.com
([@Digihums](https://twitter.com/Digihums))

GeeksWithoutBounds

Humanitarian Open Street Map Team (HOT) hotosm.org

Humanity Road

Standby Task Force

- Environment & Sustainability
- Social Exclusion
- Social Software

The earthquake that hit Haiti on 12 January 2010 took at least 100,000 lives and left heartbreak and devastation in its wake.

It also marked a turning point in crisis response: for the first time in history, the disaster yielded huge quantities of relevant and accessible user-generated data that could help agencies involved in the response.

Tragically, however, agencies had no way to process or act on all that information.

Patrick Meier, now director of social innovation at Qatar Computing Research Institute, was heading up Ushahidi's part in the response, and remembers setting up an SMS platform to crowdsource texts from affected communities. 'We were just completely overwhelmed,' he says. 'We had this huge backlog and were never really able to catch up.'

Nor was he alone – the American Red Cross's communications team in Washington was inundated with posts and messages – but had no efficient mechanic to relay that information to search and rescue teams on the ground.

Haiti inspired Meier to fix that gap: and he set out to establish a 'network of networks', or umbrella group, for volunteers that could be quickly mobilised to support crisis agencies in disaster response.

His Digital Humanitarian Network acts as the single conduit into technical and volunteer communities around the world meaning aid agencies can tap the appropriate skills ranging from GIS mapping and crowdsourcing to data analysis and collection.

Those volunteers' skills have already been used everywhere from South Sudan, Congo, Philippines, and Pakistan: in 2011, they sifted through 20,000 social media messages in the first 24 hours of typhoon Pablo alone, creating a geolocated database of information on helpful information, asks for help, and crop damage to make the first-ever UN crisis map based purely on crowdsourced information. The data is crunched using micromapper, a microtasking app that lets volunteer 'clickers' tag user generated content by categories being that information is passed on to more highly skilled volunteers to extrapolate onto maps.

'You don't have to be a superhero to make a huge difference to a humanitarian operation, says Meier. '[with] just five minutes on the bus ride to work you can click through 20 tweets.'

Image courtesy of Digital Humanitarian Network

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