

Technology stewardship in the face of a crisis. An interview with Dina Mehta

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Dina Mehta is an ethnographer and a prominent blogger in India and the world. Her visibility and expertise grew when she joined a handful of other bloggers to respond after the Tsunami of 2005. During the Tsunami she galvanized a network of people to offer support and assistance, and started a new way of voluntary participation in emergency and disaster response. We interviewed Dina, exploring how her network of bloggers was mobilized for disaster relief, and what role technology stewardship played in their work.

Tell us a bit about how you became involved in online disaster relief.

The tsunami was a significant event. I think it took a great disaster for something like this to mobilize bloggers. Right from the initial impact, people began to respond with spontaneous outpourings on the internet. For example, blogs started popping up offering assistance. People on the ground began to text us (via mobile phone), feeding us information. It was a heartfelt response. We started posting the updates online in real time. This was information spoken in real voices, not CNN or news channels. People were telling their own stories about what was going on.

What does good technology stewardship look like in the face of a crisis?

Lesson 1: start with technology that has very low entry barriers. Initially we started aggregating first hand accounts with reports and pictures from bloggers in the zone and from other news sources. We started off with a very simple blog on Blogger (<http://www.blogger.com>). I wasn't very happy about that, but in hindsight it was one of the best choices we could have made because Blogger was such an easy platform. Within a day, we had about 200 volunteers working on it.

Lesson 2: make it easy for people to find the information they need. As we started blogging and putting information onto the blog, we found things were getting lost. At that time Blogger did not have categories, everything just sat in the archives and people could not find it. A good search function is very important for people to be able to find the information they need – so in due course, someone added a paid search engine, out of the goodness of their heart.

Lesson 3: wikis can be a great tool for organizing disaster information. Wikis are useful but you need to be clear about different people's roles in the wiki, and monitor the wiki around the clock. It was through experience that we discovered how some things worked, while others did not. For instance, someone came up with the idea of sub-blogs, like 'help needed', and 'missing persons'. We set them all up, and our volunteers set up teams to manually transfer posts into it. And then

we thought, why not use a wiki as a support to the main blog, rather than moving posts between the sub-blogs (blogs within blogs). We knew we needed to structure the information more than just by chronological flow, so we made a wiki where we could classify information more meaningfully than in the blog. This made it possible for people offering help, to identify the kind of help required for a specific zone.

To set up a wiki, we went to Wikinews (<http://en.wikinews.org>), owned by Wikimedia Foundation (<http://wikimediafoundation.org>), but were closed down there because we weren't in compliance with their policies. A big discussion ensued with people from Wikimedia, using Internet Relay Chat (IRC), in which my fellow volunteer and I asked them to overlook their rules and regulations for once and let us use the wiki – but still they refused. However, one kind soul there suggested we host it on our own and they helped us to transfer everything to our server. We bought the domain <http://www.tsunamihelp.info> – and that's how the wiki was born.

We then set up a wiki team. The people involved taught each other about the wikis, and, acting as janitors, monitors, gardeners, transferred the information from the blogs. In a matter of a few hours it was up. So many people just doing the work! Using instant messenger (IM) to coordinate, we were manning the blog and wiki 24 hours all around the world, and that was critical. Even losing two hours in such a critical situation could prove to be a big loss.

So it was like action research: learn, evaluate, put the learning into action?

It was flow. We improvised on the spot as we went along. We had technology at the heart and we could use it. I can't see this done on a cold website like in the past. Blogs have a face, they allow easy access. What you need to make it work is a lot of hands to bring people in, unless you are an NGO with a large staff. We were just citizens.

What was the process for bringing in and organizing the volunteers?

We asked people, 'What can you do? Can you blog?' If they did, we set them right to work. If they didn't, we sent them to go and find out what it was. We gave the bloggers the password for the blogger account, let them figure out where the most important information was and they put it on to the blog. There were so many people sifting through information, that we just let them get to work. The work was amazing. People would say the blog template looked messed up. We would respond: 'OK, then fix it!'

There was very little information coming through from certain regions during the tsunami disaster. So we had to have people on the ground, which was critical for accessing useful information.

A YahooGroup (<http://www.yahogroups.com>) was used to communicate with everyone. An attempt was made to designate leadership, as some of the more experienced people involved decided that the unstructured communication channels were not working. But things moved too fast. People kept volunteering. For eight nights we hardly slept. We just wanted to get on with the job, forget about who is doing what, forget thinking about the need for creating an organization. If someone wanted to buy a domain, they bought it and we would sort it out after the next immediate task was done. All in all, it took a lot of heart, but some sort of organization happened and an emergent system evolved, even in the midst of the chaos.

We later created templates out of what we learned, and have used them again, but the key to success is to consider them living documents. We would do translations on the fly, pull in pictures from Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>), and bring in our knowledge on social media, collaborative spaces and online communities as needed.

Among the volunteers, the team looked upon some as natural leaders because of their experience in dealing with people and the technologies involved. While some of us were older, there were others showing amazing maturity and leadership in spite of their youth. Then there were people putting in so much; they were telling their bosses that they could not work because they had to volunteer. For example, we were having a chat about something urgent on the blog, and a volunteer said “hang on, that was my boss – but I told him to go away because I was working on this”.

The whole initiative wasn't about getting credit, no one needed their names associated with it. We had janitors, monitors, gardeners to clean up the wiki, clean up duplicates, and fix posts that did not make sense. They transplanted blog posts onto the wiki. These volunteers emerged and took on the roles – they were tremendous. If we needed help, we asked for specific tasks and people would respond on the email list asking for instructions.

Who told them what to do?

We did not set out for a formal group. I had never met any of these people face to face. Some were blog buddies. People fed us links and as we worked, subgroups emerged on their own. But it is very difficult to articulate how it emerged, because there was no formal process we were following. In fact, most of the people didn't know what a wiki was and many had never blogged before.

What conditions helped this emergence?

First, we wanted to do something. We all felt dreadful about what was going on. It was huge, especially in this part of the world. Asians living abroad, especially those in US, also wanted to pitch in. So because many of us could not physically go and help in the disaster-affected areas, this was the next best thing. It takes a big disaster, a big shock to stimulate this kind of response. Generating a similar response for ongoing issues is much more challenging.

The strange thing is I did not know any of these bloggers before and wasn't into the Indian blog scene either. But there was this huge emotion. Each one urged and helped the other and supported them to go on.

The second condition was the technology we used. But even so, if it had been a cold information site, making lists and such, it would not have worked. Our personal involvement made it so much more human. A core group of 5 or 6 people naturally emerged as the stewards. One woman took on the role of technology leader, but pitched a traditional approach involving ‘minutes of meetings’, content management systems, and so forth. This was the old way of working which we were trying to avoid – the blog and the wiki served our purposes perfectly.

Did you lose people who could not handle the chaos?

People's involvement varied, but there was ample work for everyone. At the peak 200 people were involved; this lasted for 10-15 days. Then many went back to their regular lives. Some people thought should we set up a NGO and do this regularly, but while I am happy to help, a formal organization is off-putting. Today we have a core group of about 7 people and a worldwide help group with templates, so if anything happens again, we are ready to respond. When hurricane Katrina happened (2005), what was important was not so much the blog but the wiki. We focused on communication. We had help lines, using a Skype-in line in New Orleans. People were calling in, I was picking up calls like a call center employee and was pointing them to sources. They were frustrated, wanted help, and only saw huge lines at the Red Cross. We could say, OK, check this out. We did not ask for donations. We agreed we didn't want to do that. We focused on information flow.

You mentioned the core group. What is the series of steps that you follow?

We begin by assessing what we need, and it just happens from there. The blog is up with the same template. The wiki is up with the same template. Whoever has information first puts it up. The new blog is activated and you start working on it.

With Katrina, we needed to figure out what to focus on, but had less volunteers to do the work. Katrina requirements were different from the tsunami: it was more about being a listener, hearing people's stories. But people were also providing us with information. We would first ask if they could put it on the wiki themselves; if not, we did it for them. This sense of information technology stewardship has emerged in the core group. We feel we have a model that works, so why not use it when something happens? And we do it because we want to do it.

There are other systems like Sahana (<http://www.sahana.lk>), and blog systems to prepare for the next disaster. I recently had the chance to meet the folks behind Sahana, a brilliant system. However, what we have can complement it: it is lightweight, agile, flexible, human – and that meets certain needs.

Through this process you became a disaster response technology steward. Did you ever think you would find yourself in that role?

No; you could say it happened accidentally. I was not a tech person and therefore never imagined that I could do this and that it would take place as it did. But you can do it if you have your feet on the ground, know what is possible and have your heart feel a need to respond to a disaster. Overall, it has been a magical experience.

What else have you observed as an ethnographer about technology stewardship in your work in India?

Mobile phones clearly have a huge potential, especially led by the youth. In the Philippines, SMS campaigns and 'smart mobs' are everywhere [smart mob: a technology-mediated network enabling people to connect to information and others, allowing a form of social coordination – Editor]. They have for instance been using mobile campaigns to effect political change. In India this isn't occurring yet, although many TV channels are using exploring the use of SMS to generate mobile-based campaigns for justice. Clearly the youth are leading the mobile space.

How do you think the youth teach each other? How does a practice spread?

This can be simply observed in day to day practice. For instance: go to a coffee shop where the youth gathers, and you can observe them picking up their phone and sending messages to each other via Bluetooth (a form of wireless communication). Some are emailing, some using SMS, but either way it very much alive and spontaneous.

Recently, I have been exploring such dynamics among several youth groups. They show off what they have and can do: GPS, sexy looking phone, entering contests, getting discount and access to resources they did not have earlier. But other than personal use, I'm not sure about the degree by which such technology is applied for other purposes. So not really any kind of stewardship, just a must-have as an expression of status consciousness. But I would love to see these technologies used for social, environmental, political issues to motivate action.

Anything different in the rural communities?

Again, mobile phones are making a difference in the social structure. Everything used to be caste-based, discerning the 'haves' from the 'have-nots'. Those with a say and influence in the rural area all belonged to a certain caste. Today it is about access to information, connectivity, and connection with the outside world. Some villages are still completely 'dark', with no electricity, no TVs or papers, but a few mobile phones connecting them to the outside world. To charge them, their owners have to go into nearby towns, but they are using them as a means to trade, to bring information into the village, to communicate with the outside. In such communities, the person with the mobile phone is gaining influence, regardless of caste. It is a new role, influencing community activities and power relations.

So is the village leader the person with the technology?

Sometimes, yes, but often a son or daughter leaves the village, migrates to the city, and brings the phone back when they come for a vacation, leaving it behind for the family.

Who is playing the role of 'technology steward' within a family structure?

It is definitely the children. This is challenging the idea of parents being the voice of authority: the children are ahead in terms of their knowledge of technology. Parents are being introduced to technology and are learning a whole new vocabulary through their kids. For instance, kids are teaching their parents to use SMS. Even in my family, I am the one introducing my 72-year old mother to new technologies. It keeps her agile. My father is still a surgeon, in his 80's, and he likes to keep in touch with what is going on, so I will set him up with the Internet when he finally retires.

Generally, these developments have fostered far greater respect for children and they are given more freedom, because they have access to more information to challenge their parents' assumptions.

If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for from your tech stewards, for the next generation?

I would wish that they would use the potential of technology to change things, to better their lives in a more socially responsible way. But maybe I am expecting too much. The drive today here in India is money, success and achievement; urban India is on a big buoyant ride. For instance, if you look at Indian blogs, the number is increasing daily. Most of these are about

Bollywood and politics in a superficial manner; I want more depth. We are forgetting the good we can do, if only people would mobilize themselves politically, socially and environmentally. Technologies can enable that to happen, and small initiatives are popping up. But so much more can still be done.

Postscript

Dina Mehta's blog can be followed on <http://radio.weblogs.com/0121664>.
The Tsunami help blog can be found on <http://tsunamihelp.blogspot.com> and the wiki is available on <http://www.tsunamihelp.info/wiki>.

Abstract

In an interview with ethnographer and blogger Dina Mehta, the role of technology steward is explored in the context of voluntary online disaster relief work. The choice and deployment of software, volunteer organization, mutual support and distributed leadership are explored in the interview.

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