

Japan disaster sparks social media innovation

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In this image released by Chris MacKenzie, an illustration titled "Copter Lift" used in "Quakebook," designed by contributor Chris MacKenzie, is shown. A British teacher living in Abiko city, just east of Tokyo, is leading a volunteer team of bloggers, writers and editors producing "Quakebook," a collection of reflections, essays and images of the March 11 earthquake that will be sold in the coming days as a digital publication. Proceeds from the project will go to the Japanese Red Cross, said the 40-year-old, who goes by the pseudonym "Our Man in Abiko." (AP Photo/Chris MacKenzie) NO SALES, MANDATORY CREDIT

(AP) -- As Japan grapples with an unprecedented triple disaster - earthquake, tsunami, nuclear crisis - the Web has spawned creativity and innovation online amid a collective desire to ease suffering.

Once the magnitude of the March 11 disaster became clear, the online world began asking, "How can we help?"

And for that, social media offered the ideal platform for good ideas to spread quickly, supplementing efforts launched by giants like [Google](#) and Facebook.

A British teacher living in Abiko city, just east of Tokyo, is leading a volunteer team of bloggers, writers and editors producing "Quakebook," a collection of reflections, essays and images of the earthquake that will be sold in the coming days as a digital publication. Proceeds from the project will go to the Japanese Red Cross, said the 40-year-old, who goes by the pseudonym "Our Man in Abiko."

The entirely Twitter-sourced project started with a single [tweet](#) exactly a week after the earthquake. Within an hour, he had received two submissions, which soon grew to the 87 that now comprise the book.

Quakebook involves some 200 people in Japan and abroad, and the group is in negotiations to sell the download on Amazon.com. It didn't take long for others to notice. [Twitter](#) itself has sent out a tweet about Quakebook, as has Yoko Ono. Best-selling novelist Barry Eisler wrote the foreword for the book. Organizers, including Our Man in Abiko, will hold a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan in Tokyo on Friday.

"I just thought I want to do something," he said in a telephone interview. "I felt completely helpless."

Another project, "World's 1000 Messages for Japan," is an effort to convey thoughts from around the globe. Writers can leave short notes on Facebook or through e-mail, which a group of volunteers then translate into Japanese. The translations are then posted on Twitter as well as the

group's website.

"The news of the earthquake, tsunami, and meltdown in Japan has mostly been horrifying. But it has also served as a reminder of the strength and resolve that comes out of Japanese culture," said one recent message on the project's Facebook page.

The calamitous events that transfixed people worldwide led to a jump in traffic among social networking sites - typical after recent major disasters elsewhere.

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster that likely killed more than 18,000 people, phone and cellular networks were either down or overwhelmed with traffic.

So people turned to the Internet to track down friends and family, and connect with those who saw the disaster unfold firsthand. In Tokyo, which suffered minimal damage, commuters wanted to know if their trains were running, and whether their neighborhoods would be subject to rolling electricity blackouts due to damage to nuclear and conventional power plants.

Figures released this week show that millions flocked to sites like Twitter following the earthquake and tsunami. Its audience grew by a third to 7.5 million users during March 7-13 compared with the previous week, according to the Nielsen NetRatings Japan.

Video streaming provider Ustream and Japanese video sharing platform Nico Nico Douga also saw viewership climb. Ustream's audience more than doubled to 1.4 million, driven largely by public broadcaster NHK's channel featuring live coverage online, the report said.

The numbers underscore the increasingly valuable role that social media,

particularly Twitter, can play in the wake of natural disasters. The microblogging site helped drive fundraising after the earthquake in Haiti last year, and it served as a critical communication tool after the New Zealand earthquake in February.

Twitter was already a big hit in Japan, where more than three-quarters of the population is connected to the Internet. The earthquake convinced even more users of its value as a communication lifeline.

"Many people signed up for Twitter after the earthquake, and that's because they wanted to exchange information," said Nobuyuki Hayashi, a prominent Japanese tech journalist and consultant.

"Twitter played a great role in the first few days" after the quake, he said. He added, however, that the surge of activity also brought to light some of Twitter's shortcomings during disasters.

As helpful as Twitter was after the quake, it also helped propagate a number of unfounded rumors and fears. A post-quake fire at an oil refinery east of Tokyo led to a torrent of tweets that incorrectly claimed the blaze would result in toxic rain.

Some people moved to Facebook "because they can access more trusted information and engage in more topic-based conversation," Hayashi said.

That's something that concerns Web designer Qanta Shimizu as well. But he sees a greater good in embracing social media in times of crisis.

In 1995, when a massive earthquake devastated the western city of Kobe, the Internet was in its infancy and the mass media controlled the flow of information. National consciousness of the disaster shifted too quickly, Shimizu said, as the media moved on to new topics.

"Society has changed now, and through the Internet, I wanted to find a way to offer support indefinitely," he said.

Shimizu created a Twitter application to remind Internet users to do their part, however small. "Setsudener" - a play on the Japanese term for "save energy" - automatically darkens a user's profile picture from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., symbolizing the need to cut back on power consumption during peak demand.

Japanese Web developer Yusuke Wada created "Anpi Report" to gather and organize information posted on Twitter about missing individuals. Through [Facebook](#) and Twitter, he has found more than 200 volunteers to manually sift through tweets to enter into a database.

Anpi Report says it hopes to expand its service in the near future by linking its information with Google's "person finder" database for people who are either seeking information about a missing person or have information to provide about someone affected by the disaster.

For others, especially local governments and agencies, simply venturing onto social media has been a big step.

Mitaka city in western Tokyo decided to start a Twitter account after the earthquake. Announcements of the possible rolling blackouts led to a huge spike in traffic on the city's website that it could not handle, said spokesman Shinichi Akiyama.

One of the city's recent posts informed residents that The Tokyo Electric Power Co. had called off blackouts for Wednesday - an essential piece of information for businesses and households. The information is posted on the city's Website, but putting it out on Twitter enables the city to keep residents informed in real-time, Akiyama said.

"We're using social media a bit differently than what it was probably intended for, like having a conversation," he said. "But it has helped us realize that it's possible to use [social media](#) as a tool."

Mitaka's neighbors took note almost immediately. Nearby cities like Musashino and Koganei have also signed up for Twitter, as have numerous municipalities in the hardest-hit areas of northeast Japan.

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