

How to stay digitally connected in a natural disaster

December 12 2012, by Dana Hull

If you live in a disaster-prone area, you likely have an emergency kit that includes a medical kit, flash lights and extra batteries.

But what about your data and devices? Are your key documents - like birth certificates, passports and [insurance policies](#) - scanned and uploaded to a cloud server? Or are they sitting in a box that could be buried, burned or soaked? How do you plan to charge your smartphone if the power is out for several days?

Hurricane Sandy revealed just how dependent Americans have become on their mobile devices. In disasters, those devices become a lifeline: for calling family members, following the news and getting critical information.

After Sandy hit, many New Yorkers walked zombielike from Lower Manhattan, which lost power, in a desperate search for working [electrical outlets](#). Images of people crowding around ad hoc smartphone charging stations were widely circulated.

"The first thing that gets fixed when emergency crews go out is cellphone towers, because that's how first responders are communicating as well," said Sharon Cook, director of marketing for Eton, which makes several models of high-tech emergency radios. "Cellphone towers will be fixed before the power lines. But if your smartphone is dead, that's not very helpful to you."

Eton is not the only maker of emergency radios, but the Palo Alto, Calif.,-based company has a long-standing partnership with the American Red Cross, with several of its products available in a co-branded line with the charitable organization.

Eton sells a variety of emergency radios, including the \$60 FRX3, which includes a built-in LED flashlight and a USB smartphone charger. The radio can use four different power sources: AAA batteries, a built-in rechargeable battery, solar power and a hand-crank.

"We have so many stories of people whose houses became hubs of information in [natural disasters](#), from tornadoes in Alabama to Sandy, because they had our radios," Cook said. "They could use the hand-crank and solar to keep the radio going, and then neighbors were using it to get a little juice for their smartphones."

Other solar-powered smartphone chargers include the PowerMonkey and the Nookero SunRay Pro Power Panel.

New York-based tech journalist Jill Fehrenbacher of Inhabitat.com wrote about how the Nookero solar charger saved her sanity after Hurricane Sandy.

"This device was the only thing in my house that could draw enough charge through a window to breathe life back into my sad little phone," Fehrenbacher wrote in the article.

"And what a difference a charged phone made! Once my phone was finally charged I was able to check the news, find out that power would be out for probably at least a week, and then, subsequently, make arrangements to high-tail it out of the dark, cold & desperate SoPo ('South of Power') zone to a friend's place uptown to enjoy a hot shower, clean water, warm food and news."

In a disaster, you may lose all hard copies of your critical personal documents. Upload password-protected copies of key documents - insurance policies, passports, birth certificates, photographs of pets - to a backup drive that is secured in a remote location or to a cloud-based storage system. Another option is to email copies of the documents to yourself.

Store extra batteries or chargers - ideally hand-cranked or solar - with your emergency kits or in an automobile so your devices can remain powered.

The Red Cross also has a "Safe and Well" website designed to let family and friends know that you are OK after a disaster. You can click on a "List Myself as Safe and Well" button to register yourself on the site, and concerned friends and relatives can search the list.

PREPARE YOUR DATA AND DEVICES:

Your natural disaster emergency kit should include water, food, flashlights and a medical kit. But you also need a solar-powered or hand-cranked radio, preferably one that can charge your cellphone, and extra batteries or chargers (hand-crank or solar) for your phone. Here are a few other tips for being digitally prepared:

1. Be sure to upload key documents - birth certificate, passport, insurance policies, rental agreements or mortgage documents, family photos and photos of pets - to a backup drive that is secured in a remote location or to a cloud-based storage system.
2. Download key apps from the American Red Cross, including the First Aid app: www.redcross.org/prepare/mobile-apps .
3. Identify an out-of-town friend you can call who can be your point of

contact if communication systems locally fail or are overwhelmed.

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