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9/26/17

SI 310/King

Ushahidi Case Study

Ushahidi is a crowd-sourced mapping software used to track elections and combat natural disasters. The platform has been successful in the past, but flaws in the information infrastructure were exposed in its failure during the Torabian Earthquake.

The information infrastructure of Ushahidi is centered around its mapping software. The information comes from maps that the software produces and user input from victims and volunteers. The existing infrastructure of Torabia (electrical power, computers, cell phones) worked with Ushahidi’s infrastructure to perform its function.

The stakeholders in Ushahidi are the Torabian government and citizens, Help International, Part-3, and other countries observing the the software’s usability. The interests of these stakeholders revolve around the intended use of Ushahidi. Victims of the earthquake, Help International, and certain factions of the Torabian government used the mapping technology to spread vital information about the crisis. Part-3 and other factions of the government looked to take advantage of this information to push their hostile agendas.

The unrestricted access of Ushahidi’s infrastructure created chaos for its users and allowed opposing forces to use infrastructure inversion to push their hostile agenda. First, because anyone in Torabia can upload information to Ushahidi, aid workers experienced information overload. Untrained volunteers were responsible for evaluating and acting on reports from victims. Incorrect information and contradicting reports made providing aid to appropriate areas a challenge. Also, Ushahidi allowed rebel group, Part-3, to access its information. Part-3 had the same information as the citizens of Torabia. They used infrastructure inversion to transform software designed for disaster relief into reconnaissance for a hostile revolution.

The requirements for Ushahidi were not tailored to the needs of Torabia. Users of the software must be screened to ensure proper use of the information. The ease of access allowed Part-3 to take advantage of the software. Next, it is important to consider the relationship between the software’s information infrastructure and the situation’s context. For example, the language barrier prevented volunteers from understanding information provided by citizens. Translation is one of multiple requirements neglected by Ushahidi that was required for success in Torabia. Access and Torabia’s context must be considered.