

Searching for Information to Help at a Distance in Disaster Response: A Case Study of "Tutteli to Japan"

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ABSTRACT

"Tutteli to Japan" (TTJ) refers to Japanese mothers living in Finland who volunteered in organizing a private relief effort to deliver bulks of baby formula from Finland to Japan during the 2011 Great Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami disasters. Unlike commonly seen in citizen response to disasters, TTJ did not start as an extension of pre-existing social group of mothers or an informal community group of professionals under the name of TTJ. Rather, it emerged from individual responses on the Internet expressing their compassions and aspirations to do something for the disaster victims; some were on Twitter, some were on their blogs. As the devastation escalated, so did the people's eagerness to do something about the inadequate distribution of resources, and they began to address the breastfeeding mothers in Japan who only had access to powder-based baby formula. Knowing the issue left untouched by government or aid agencies, these concerned individuals, as novice learners of international aid work without a chain of command, continued seeking and sharing information in order to deliver the liquid baby formula regardless of informational, operational, and situational uncertainties surrounding them. Ultimately, these volunteers succeeded to ship six times, a total of 12,000 cartons of formula, directly delivered and distributed in twelve different locations in Japan within forty days. Drawing on a dataset containing unstructured social media data, interviews and documentation, this single-case study traces how ordinary citizens interacting online develop the idea for delivery of baby formula and how likeminded strangers come together online and mobilize resources for humanitarian logistics and distributions in both Finland and Japan. This study aims to describe how such ordinary people's information interactions shape spontaneous collaboration in disaster response. My findings suggest that independent public participation and collaborative efforts for disaster response perform as sources of tensions and various kinds of vagueness, but these are the functions that spontaneous volunteers can offer resourcefully. I argue that the TTJ illustrates the power of ordinary people embracing uncertainty and acting on information processed through humane-driven technology use, vague language and uncertain sources of information. This condition of shared uncertainty, a new concept presented in this dissertation encompasses our understanding of independent public participation and collaboration and offers an interdisciplinary bridge between research in information behavior, computer-supported cooperative work, crisis informatics and disaster studies.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

computer-supported collaborative work; information needs; information seeking; information use; community engagement

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

searching as learning; self-organizing; citizen participation and engagement; crisis informatics