

CHI and Public Policy Q&A

1. I believe an important issue in HCI and public policy is incorporating user-centered design practices into the strategic analysis of how communities (including governmental) can help analyze, understand, and inform the public about disaster and preparedness and accurately meet the needs of citizens once a disaster has taken place.

In today's ubiquitous world are we talking about computers and humans or communication, context and humans? Handheld communications devices and wireless networks make the computer invisible, but how people communicate, congregate, establish makeshift communities and create informal social networks is still an important organizing principle to understand because many times highly complex technology systems fail during disasters. Recently, funding and efforts have been geared towards enabling technology to work correctly during a disaster and enable people to disseminate and transmit accurate and timely information, but it is only part of the puzzle of an infrastructure that makes effective and efficient use of the information. The bad news is that the technology part may be the easy part. "Putting in sensors is the easy part. The difficult part here would be coordination between emergency-response agencies in the region. Then, you have to deal with education, preparedness and training issue."—*Harley Benz of the USGS National Earthquake Information Service in a case brief for the South East Asian Tsunami warning system.*

Understanding how individuals and organizations communicate before, during and after disasters may help us understand what make most sense. In order to do this, such techniques widely recognized as user-centered design techniques (participatory design and ethnographic research) may help us understand the landscape of disaster and the contributing factors to dynamic and successful communication systems before, during and after a disaster.

2. I have been a user researcher/interaction designer in the technology sector for 10 years, but became very interested in the breakdown and reconfiguration of human interaction due to the loss of telecommunications during 9/11 in New York. My interest grew into action when Hurricane Katrina devastated communities in the Gulf Coast region of the U.S. Since September, 2005 I have worked when possible (mostly weekends) as a type of ethnographic one-woman road warrior in New Orleans, distributing journals with cameras and videotaping people's stories to gather research materials. The materials I have gathered so far involve aid workers and citizens of the community in Bay St. Louis and Slidell. The research involves the day-to-day life of the people who have lived through and continue to live in a disaster. I have no clear idea how to impact public policy, just that the work could potentially be valuable or a prototype for a set of personas and scenarios establishing accurate needs and requirements for communities suffering through disaster.

I am also currently a contracted usability specialist on the Design for Democracy project. A project by AIGA and UPA to improve the voting process in the U.S. by creating more usable and better designs for ballots, signage and voter registration cards.