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by Peter Lyn René

Mobile apps are now taken for granted in our society, not because they are unimportant but because they are plentiful and readily available. When we download apps from the Android's Play Store or Apple's App Store, it is a relative mundane task. We search for free apps or pay for an app to help us remain organized, stay in shape, meet our deadlines, check our bank balance or remind us, remind us, remind us. Thanks to this wonderful era of mobile technology, there is an app for practically everything needed to make our lives an absolute joy.

But apps are not just relegated to bring laughs, joy or structure to our lives. They can also be practical, necessary and life-saving. In the last five years, we have witnessed a paradigm shift in emergency management by which the reliance of "brick and mortar" procedures—such as telephones, computers, ships, planes and vehicles used to assist in disaster relief—are now nicely complemented with mobile apps specifically designed for disaster relief. One technological marvel should not be left out of the conversation: the use of unmanned automated vehicles (UAVs), better known as drones.

When discussing emergency management, it can be divided into two parts: disaster preparedness and the actual disaster. Nowhere more than the Caribbean region is disaster preparedness an essential practice. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes and tropical storms, will batter nations.

One of the best apps according to CNN is Hurricane Tracker. This app includes live video briefings on hurricanes, real time condition updates, push alerts, dozens of maps and minute-by-minute updates (Hurricane Tracker, 2016). This app also has access to the NOAA weather radio, complete with high resolution animation. Another app that focuses specifically on the Atlantic, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico region is Hurricane Express. Like Hurricane Tracker, it provides forecasts, video updates and satellite imagery with information from The National Hurricane Center (MissionMode, 2016). In a study by Paul Cerrato and Iltifat Husain, M.D., the Red Cross Apps were identified as the group with the most useful applications for natural disasters (Cerrato, Husain, 2015). Dr. Husain indicated that with the advancements in social media and a surge in the prevalence of smartphones, we are now seeing live Twitter and Facebook updates and emergency-related applications being used in disaster response efforts. Perhaps one of the best apps to assist in emergency management is the FEMA app. It includes an interactive emergency kit list, emergency meeting locations that can be stored and a map of open shelters. This free app (FEMA, 2016) provides a feature that lets users create Global Positioning System photo reports that can be inserted in a map for others to see.

At the ninth Caribbean Conference on Comprehensive Disaster Management, hosted by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) and the Bahamas' National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) in November 2015 (IFRC. 2015), the Red Cross Apps were the leading instrument discussed, promoted and supported (Red Cross, 2016). The Bahamas Red Cross, through their Resilience in The Americas (RITA) program, has a multi-hazard smartphone app which features information on natural hazards, basic first aid procedures and emergency messaging, including location,

emergency lights and sound. This app was well-received and viewed as useful to the natural disaster-prone Caribbean.

Not to be outdone by mobile apps, responding to and executing disaster relief just got easier thanks to drones that are patiently waiting their turn to be officially called up to assist first responders. CNN's Heather Kelly indicated as far back as 2013 that these portable, affordable aircraft can launch quickly in dangerous situations, locate survivors and send data about their whereabouts to responders on the ground (Kelly, 2013). The UAV industry and emergency responders are preparing for the day when they can launch drones after tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and any other disaster.

Challenges to emergency management and public policy have changed and continue to change to stay in step with technological advances. Gone are the days when disaster relief meant supply ships and military assessments and where areas devastated by natural disasters remained technologically cut off from the rest of the world. The smartphone, in its many forms, has proven itself to be a powerful tool in emergency management and the use of drones continues to grow.

Emergency management agencies and other companies have now developed hundreds of apps to assist individuals to be better prepared for impending storms and hurricanes. These apps not only keep emergency managers informed but also connected to efforts on the ground. DeeDee Bennett exclaimed this is a wonderful time to be in emergency management. The progression of technology will forever change our vulnerability, preparedness, response, recovery and resilience (Bennett, n.d.). The new use of drones, robots, smartphones and even wearables during disasters will certainly spark more growth in the practice of emergency management.

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About the Author

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