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News: SMS Alerts A Disaster?

Submitted by [Mike Grenville](#) on Fri, 06 Jan 2006 13:08

Various initiatives are under way using SMS as a way to alert people when there is an emergency situation. But while SMS might seem to be an obvious solution, there are some issues such as privacy that need careful consideration before being rolled out too quickly.

While a number of new emergency alert systems using SMS are in development, others have been faced with issues.

In China, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) announced in January 2006 preliminary research to test an SMS based warning system in the Gansu, Anhui and Hunan regions. They hope that the system will overcome delays in providing relief efforts that has occurred in the past.

Also the European Commission is currently developing a [Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System \(GDACS\)](#) in collaboration with the UN that will provide early warning and relief coordination in future disasters. The system can send out an alert to emergency services by SMS and email within 30 minutes. Developed by DG JRC in cooperation with DG ECHO (humanitarian aid) and the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the GDACS triggers an immediate response.

Wake Up - It's A Disaster

One problem with using SMS is that you might be asleep with your phone turned off and so not receive the message. The Japanese government is testing a system that will enable an emergency-broadcast signal to be broadcast to specially designed mobile phones capable of being switched on remotely.

The ministry plans to test the system in Sapporo in April 2006, piggybacking a new broadcasting system, called One Seg, that is being set up to enable television programs to be played on mobiles.

The ministry believes using text messages would help people evacuate a disaster area safely reduce the impact of a disaster situation. It hopes to be able to implement the system within a few years.

How citizens will respond to the idea that their government can turn on their phones and broadcast messages to them at any time may depend on how responsibly it is used in practice.

Dutch System Goes to Cell

A project underway in the Netherlands may raise such concerns. In August 2004 the Dutch Ministry of Economic affairs commissioned LogicaCMG to build the world's first government sponsored mobile alert system based on cell broadcast (CB) technology.

The pilot is currently taking place in Zoetermeer, and with plans to extend it to Amsterdam and the south-western province of Zeeland. The government is working with mobile phone operators KPN, Vodafone and Telfort, which cover some 85 percent of all Dutch cell phone owners.

The country has been divided in 5000 cells and information can be broadcasted to each of these cells and Dutch mobile operators have declared that they are willing to implement CB in their networks. Unlike SMS, with CB the sender does not need to know the mobile phone number of the recipient and the message is broadcast to all phones in that area.

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However this initiative by the national government has meant that a local government project in [Harderwijk](#) in the Netherlands has ended.

Ron Everts Co-founder of [Zorg en Veiligheid](#) behind the project said that it will fail for two reasons. "First it lacks flexibility" says Everts, "everyone gets the same message in that area, so if it is used for example if the local school is closed, then people without children will soon get fed up with all sorts of alerts not relevant to them."

But Everts real issue with the project is the way the project is to be made open to advertisers. The plan is to have the messages funded with 60% commercial advertising and only 40% alert messages.

Everts predicts that "After six commercial messages people will stop reading them and it will lose it's credibility." Privacy will also be a problem says Everts; "Cell Broadcast has a critical point in that as they send SMS without asking permission, so it will not be possible to ask for confirmation from citizen that they have received the message."

Philip A. Feltzer, Managing Director of [Citizen Alert Services BV](#), another service in the Netherlands is more optimistic about the chances of success of Cell Broadcast, but he agrees that cost will be an issue. "I do believe however that the Dutch Government will have a hard time in getting their business case approved by the Finance Ministry. It will presumably be too expensive to roll out CB throughout The Netherlands" said Feltzer.

"Our system was tested thoroughly in the city of Vlaardingen and is now operational in the 22 municipalities of the Rotterdam Rijnmond area. Other regions in The Netherlands are now considering joining this service.

We offer a whole range of different SMS alert services such as air-pollution, hay fever, extreme weather and flooding for Dutch residents to subscribe to: www.alarmbericht.nl.

"I believe that an ideal public warning system consists of a combination of Cell Broadcast and SMS" said Feltzer.

Tsunami Warning Hoax

The other issues with SMS alarm systems is the potential for spoofing. The Malaysian government recently had to advise the public not to believe text messages being circulated ahead of the first anniversary of the Tsunami which warned of the possibility of tsunami occurrences this month or in January.

Deputy Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Kong Cho Ha said people should only believe such information if it was from the government agencies such as the ministry itself and the Meteorological Department. He said the setting up of a tsunami early warning system was on schedule and was expected to complete by the end of this year.