

by Erik Hersman

“Neo-geo”. That’s the slang term used among mapping gurus when they talk about the new world of web-based map mashups and location aware services. Most of us don’t want, or don’t have the time, to read a lot of news anymore. Our world of web surfing means quick hits and scanning. Map-based information, and other visualisations, allow us to understand at a glance what is happening and where.

Activist mapping in Africa

Individuals in the activist communities are generally the first to latch onto new technologies as they move to sidestep older and more powerful institutions, government or otherwise. It has happened with mobile phones, online video and blogs. This couldn’t be truer than what we’re seeing with activist mapping projects.

Activist mapping projects have been seen most recently in Kenya, during the post-election violence with Ushahidi.com, with UnitedforAfrica.co.za in dealing with xenophobic attacks in South Africa, and with Sokwanele right now in Zimbabwe.

Each of these map deployments are important for two reasons. First, they augment the mainstream media by adding voices that couldn’t be heard easily before – many times with stories that are taking place where the media are not. Second, they provide a way for people to glance at a map, gather information quickly and then dig down into the details if they so choose.

So we see it serves two end-users, the people the news is happening to, and the people who want to find out what is happening.

Visuals matter

It’s amazing how simple visuals can take a bunch of data and make it real. Below is a chart showing the mayhem, broken down by type. It’s a serious and shocking story, but one that can be told in almost real-time because of our current technology.

This is why mapping and other visualisations are so important. Sokwanele is simply collecting the news reports then archiving and parsing them for information. When those stories come in ones and twos throughout the week, it’s easier to ignore. When they’re put forward as a body of evidence using visuals to show their aggregate statistics, it becomes damning and impossible to ignore.

Digital mapping a tool for getting attention quickly

Beyond activism: rural Africa, mobiles and maps

Though I’m not a journalist, I know it’s expensive (in both time and money) to travel to parts of rural Africa. This is why news from both international and in-country media organisations in these areas is so rare.

Enter the mobile phone, another big technological breakthrough without which the mapping portion would be less effective.

Once individuals in rural areas know that they can report their local news and information to someone with a simple text message things begin to get exciting. What we’re seeing is the beginnings of a move towards citizen-generated information about news and events in near-real time.

We’re suddenly realising that we can actually tap into the collective citizenry for information on things as they happen. Best of all, distance from a larger town or paved road no longer matters, only one’s distance from the nearest cell tower.

Apply that information (data) to a map, and a whole host of opportunities arise. First, aggregating that information at the country and region levels allows

people to see and understand patterns hidden within mountains of data. Second, the information can be archived and stored for future use when doing historical fact-finding.

Ethan Zuckerman says: “User-generated content, on average, is a lot less interesting than professional content. But there are a lot more people creating their own content for fun than those doing so for a living, and in aggregate, that content is at least as interesting.” (<http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog>).

Some final thoughts

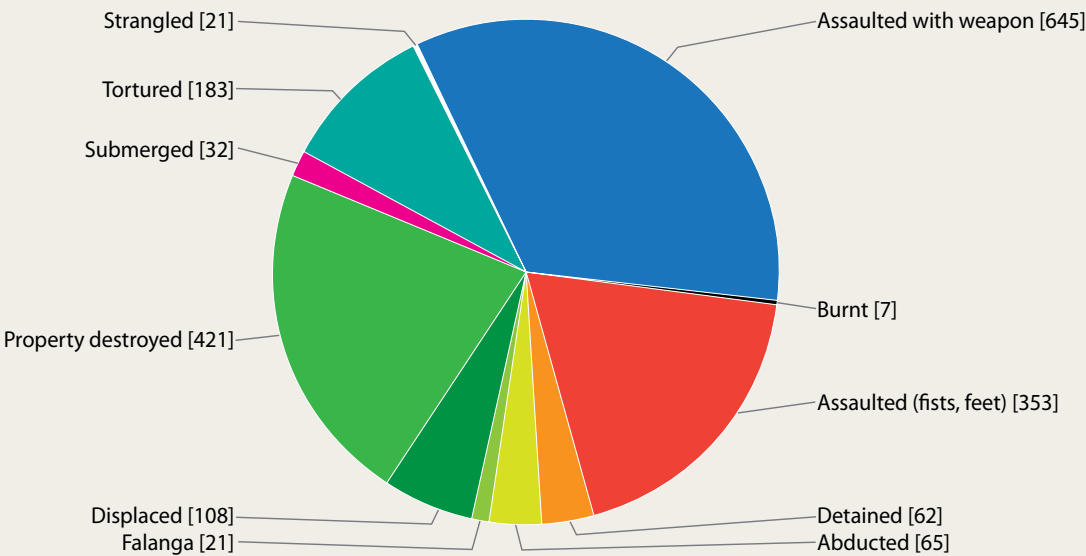
It’s important to remember that mapping for human rights violations and mapping for activism are two separate things. The first needs both exacting detail and verified incidents, whereas the second doesn’t and has a primary goal of getting enough data to gather attention to a specific issue.

Finally, a digitally-connected world not only grants us a front-row seat to the rest of the world, but also the power to influence events and create change in a way that was impossible just a few short decades ago.

Events that may occur thousands of miles away are in fact – quite literally – in our digital backyard.

Which makes it a lot harder to just sit back and watch.

Sokwanele violence-type graphic



Breakdown by violation

Information here is based on victim’s testimony. Sokwanele believes that the figures for those ‘displaced’ is a gross underestimate: at the time of giving the testimony, many will not have known they could not return to the area they have left and may not have described themselves as ‘displaced’.