Disaster response goes digital - but not for all

NEW ORLEANS: What do you do if you are a disaster manager in a coastal city when a powerful earthquake hits offshore? You start tweeting life-saving updates and safety information to the public, alert your volunteers via SMS and set up a helpline. You host a conference call for rescue workers using open-source tools and provide them with access to key documents via an online file-sharing service before reaching out to emergency accommodation providers through lodgings websites. At a conference on resilience in New Orleans this week, technology companies outlined the increasingly sophisticated tools they are offering - on an altruistic basis - to help people cope better when disasters strike.

They are also collaborating to advance the speed and efficacy with which those tools can be deployed, said Kellie Bentz, head of global disaster response and relief for online accommodation marketplace Airbnb. "In this space, we don't believe there is any room for competition - we should all be working together; there is just too much to do," she said. Tech firms, including Google and Facebook, have "a very informal charter" to talk to each other so they can work better with governments and aid groups, she added. And it's not just in natural disasters like earthquakes and floods that tech companies are offering help.

Helping people in need

Later this year Airbnb plans to launch a new community of socially minded hosts that want to put up - for free - people in need, from refugees to aid workers and the homeless, said Bentz. The company already enables its 3 million hosts to offer shelter to people hit by emergencies and those who assist them - a service that has been activated in some 55 disasters globally since 2013, with more than 2,000 nights' accommodation donated. Cloud communications platform Twilio.org, meanwhile, is partnering with the International Rescue Committee charity so that refugees in Greece can find out the date of their asylum appointment in their own language via a phone-based voice response system.

Tom Tarantino, Twitter's public policy manager, said the company aims to "weaponise Twitter in a disaster" by helping users make the most of different features - from dedicated hashtags to Twitter handle lists, adverts and live video - to get vital information to those affected as quickly as possible. If communications go down or are overloaded in a disaster, an SMS version of Twitter can be activated, or Twilio can use its connections to find out which data networks are still on and figure out when others will be up and running, the experts said.

Yet while these companies are seeking innovative ways to assist in disasters, they acknowledged technology cannot always substitute for human support, and some of those affected may be reluctant to try out new things in tough circumstances. To overcome this issue, Airbnb sends employees and volunteers to disaster zones to help people use the online platform, Bentz said. "Not all digital solutions are right to solve human problems," said Erika Murdock Balbuena, head of strategic initiatives with Twilio.org. In a crisis, people may not want to have to sign up for something on a web page but just be reassured they will have a safe place to sleep, she added.

Digital illiteracy

In a separate discussion at the conference, government officials highlighted the difficulties of using vast amounts of information pouring in via social media to make good decisions. "From an emergency management perspective, it's a huge mess," said Sara Estes White, deputy chief information officer for New Orleans. "How do you take it and make it useful?" Mark Dix of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said agencies must become "clever in how we manipulate, use, sort and filter that data" to answer the right questions. Software has been developed that can mine tweets and other crowd-sourced reports from crisis zones to find out what is happening where - from mapping floods in Jakarta to identifying relief needs after Hurricane Sandy hit New York in 2012. But some vulnerable groups - often the elderly or the poorest families - cannot use the internet, experts cautioned. In New Orleans, which was battered by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, around two-thirds of the lowest-income groups do not have access to the internet, said Estes White. — Reuters

FRANKFURT: Photo shows the US Consulate General in Frankfurt, Germany. WikiLeaks has published thousands of documents purportedly taken from the Central Intelligence Agency's Center for Cyber Intelligence, a dramatic release that appears to expose intimate details of America's cyberespionage toolkit. — AP

WikiLeaks' aid on CIA software holes could be mixed blessing
Anti-secrecy site offers to help fix vulnerabilities

NEW YORK: WikiLeaks has offered to help the likes of Google and Apple identify the software holes used by purported CIA hacking tools - and that puts the tech industry in something of a bind. While companies have both a responsibility and financial incentive to fix problems in their software, accepting help from WikiLeaks raises legal and ethical questions. And it's not even clear at this point exactly what kind of assistance WikiLeaks can offer.

The promise

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said Thursday that the anti-secrecy site will help technology companies find and fix software vulnerabilities in everyday gadgets such as phones and TVs. In an online news conference, Assange said some companies had asked for more details about the purported CIA cyberespionage toolkit that he revealed in a massive disclosure on Tuesday. "We have decided to work with them, to give them some exclusive access to the additional technical details we have, so that fixes can be developed and pushed out," Assange said. The digital blueprints for what he described as "cyberweapons" would be published to the world "once this material is effectively disarmed by us."

Any conditions WikiLeaks might set for its cooperation weren't immediately known. Nor was it clear if WikiLeaks holds additional details on specific vulnerabilities, or merely the tools designed to exploit them. Apple declined comment on the WikiLeaks offer, and Google didn't respond to requests for comment. Microsoft said it hopes that anyone with knowledge of software vulnerabilities would report them through the company's usual channels.

Legal questions

Tech companies could run into legal difficulties in accepting the offer, especially if they have government contracts or employees with security clearances. "The unauthorized release of classified documents does not mean it's unclassified," said Stewart Baker, a former official at the Department of Homeland Security and former legal counsel for the National Security Agency. "Doing business with WikiLeaks and reviewing classified documents poses a real risk for at least their government contracting arms and their cleared employees."

Other lawyers, however, are convinced that much of the information in the documents is so widely known that they are now part of the public domain. That means tech companies would be unlikely to face any legal liability for digging deeper with WikiLeaks. Alternatively, suppose tech companies don't accept WikiLeaks' offer to help fix any security flaws - and are subsequently hacked. At that point, they could face charges of negligence, particularly in Europe where privacy laws are much stricter than in the US, said Michael Zweiback, a former assistant US attorney and cybercrime adviser now in private practice.

Getting too close to Wikileaks

Public perception might be a bigger problem. "They don't want to be seen as endorsing or supporting an organization with a tainted reputation and an unclear agenda," said Robert Cattanach, a former US Department of Justice attorney. During the 2016 election, WikiLeaks published thousands of emails, some embarrassing, from breached Democratic Party computers and the account of a top aide to Hillary Clinton. US intelligence agencies concluded those emails were stolen by hackers connected to the Russian government in an attempt to help Donald Trump win the presidency.

The CIA did not respond directly to Assange's offer, but it appeared to take a dim view of it. "Julian Assange is not exactly a bastion of truth and integrity," CIA spokeswoman Heather Fritz Horniak said. But most tech companies already have digital hotlines to receive tips about security weaknesses, even if they come from unsavory characters. So it wouldn't break new ground for them to consult with a shadowy organization such as WikiLeaks.

A better path

Ideally, the CIA would have shared such vulnerabilities directly with companies, as other government agencies have long done. In that case, companies would not only be dealing with a known entity in an aboveboard fashion, they might also obtain a more nuanced understanding of the problems than their engineers could glean from documents or lines of computer code. And if companies could learn details about how the CIA found these vulnerabilities, they might also find additional holes using the same technique, said Johannes Ullrich, director of the Internet Storm Center at the SANS Institute.

And there are risks obtaining actual hacking tools from WikiLeaks. Some might have unadvertised features that could, for instance, start extracting data as soon as they launch. Ullrich said the CIA also might have left some traps to attack people running its exploits. — AP