

Emergency services call for stronger cooperation with tech companies

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In a nutshell:

- From watches to virtual assistants, many products now offer access to emergency services. However, it is concerning that in most cases, emergency call centres are neither informed nor ready to handle such communications.
- The current situation can have serious consequences for the safety of users.
- Without denying the importance of innovation, signatories of this position paper call on tech companies for stronger cooperation before launching any new safety functionality.

Recent months have seen rise to many new technological products offering access to emergency services. From smart watches, apps and alarms, to virtual assistants and different types of connected vehicles, it seems that the means of contacting emergency services have never been so diverse.

New emergency features are intended to enhance emergency access and make people safer. This would be applaudable if emergency services were able to receive this information. Sadly, the situation is not always so. Emergency services are often not informed of these new means of access; many even find out about them from the news. Consequently, emergency call centres are simply not ready to handle these communications.

Emergency messages from new tech products have already been creating difficult situations in emergency call centres. There have been cases where call centres have received automated messages (sometimes even in a foreign language) from apps alerting them of users in distress. Given that the emergency services had no prior information of this new product or of how the messages would be relayed to them, no protocol had been defined. Citizens were in danger, but emergency services did not know how to properly respond to these alerts.

Similarly, some innovations allow additional data to be provided to emergency services. This could potentially be very helpful, but the data is sometimes sent to emergency services in a format that they are not able to receive or use.

Providing access to emergency services without first cooperating with public authorities throws into question the effectiveness of such tools. This situation could significantly harm the credibility of a company and its products, as well as put the safety of its users at risk.

It cannot be denied that new information and communication technologies have enormous potential for improving people's safety. The past years are evidence that innovations can help to create more efficient and effective emergency services: improving the accuracy of location information of emergency calls, better predicting hazards and disasters, accessing remote locations faster, assisting emergency staff with a wide range of additional data, etc.

However, innovation can only be impactful if it results from a dialogue between all actors involved, where the real needs and requirements are heard. Hence, the signatories of this position paper would like to **highlight the necessity for increased cooperation between tech companies and relevant public authorities when developing new safety features.**

While we understand that solution providers may find it difficult to establish dialogue with every country, there are some global players who can provide the right discussion platform for tech companies to meet public safety professionals. As a significant first step, the European Emergency Number Association (EENA) is establishing a framework to enhance cooperation between the tech and emergency services communities. We therefore invite and encourage all relevant actors to contact EENA to take part in this dialogue.

We all share the objective of keeping citizens safe and the conviction that technology can and should contribute to this goal. But this will only be achieved by combining the potential that technology can offer with the experience and expertise of emergency services.

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