



**communicating with
disaster affected
communities**

Social Media in Emergencies

101 Seminar Report

Presenters

Anahi Ayala Iacucci

Senior Innovation Advisor

Internews Center for Innovation &
Learning

Gregory Barrow

Director of UK Liaison Office

World Food Programme

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About the CDAC Network

The vision of the CDAC Network is that communities affected by or prone to crises are supported to better withstand, and recover from, humanitarian emergencies through active engagement in decisions about the relief and recovery efforts in their country.

To achieve this, CDAC Network Members are committed to mainstreaming the provision of life-saving information and communication with crisis affected communities into emergency preparedness and response. They do this by supporting humanitarian response through coordinated communication that makes use of appropriate media and communication tools and platforms. Members also focus on how partnerships, particularly with new humanitarian actors such as media development organisations, telecoms companies and the private sector, can deliver more effective and locally appropriate outcomes.

The CDAC Network is unique in terms of who it convenes: humanitarian and media development organisations and, increasingly, technology providers. By collaborating across traditional boundaries, CDAC Network Members increase mutual understanding of the challenges they face and identify opportunities for partnership in order to bring about innovative and effective field practice and, ultimately, a more sustainable and improved response. Members seek to build capacity together, share learning and research, and advocate to ensure that two-way communication with affected communities becomes a predictable, consistent and resourced element of crisis resilience, response and recovery.

About the CDAC Network 101 Seminar Series

The purpose of the CDAC Network's '101 Seminar Series' is to build the capacity of Network Members by improving information sharing among Members as well as the wider humanitarian community. The seminars utilise the expertise and experience of Network Members who are asked to share their knowledge with others through face-to-face, practical workshops. To date, the CDAC Network has organised three seminars: 'Humanitarian Financing', 'SMS Mobile in Emergencies' and 'Humanitarian Broadcasting'. This report covers the latest seminar, 'Social Media in Emergencies', presented by Anahi Ayala Iacucci from Internews Network and Gregory Barrow from the World Food Programme. The reports from the previous seminars can be found at www.cdacnetwork.org/public/resources

This seminar took place on Monday 25th November 2013 and was generously hosted by Plan UK at its London office. The content of this report is based on the information included in the presentations from the two presenters.

Anahi Ayala Iacucci's presentation 'Social Media in Emergencies' is available here: <http://prezi.com/78sbfhz-zva8/social-media-in-emergencies-101/>

Gregory Barrow's presentation 'Social Media as a Humanitarian Tool' is available here: <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/sites/www.cdacnetwork.org/files/social20media20presentation20251113.pdf>

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What is Social Media?

In the 21st Century, communications have developed and changed dramatically due to the advancement of digital technologies from the late 1990s. With the rise of the internet, new methods of communicating emerged, starting with email and simple internet message boards. This has evolved into what we know today as social media: dynamic platforms in which users can interact in myriad ways across multiple devices. Even a few years ago in 2006, only a small percentage of people were using smartphones and even then these were limited in functionality. Fax machines were used and even Facebook wasn't open to all till late that year.

Now the world is vastly different with over one billion people using social media on a daily basis. With this advent of global communication, the gap between the global north and south is narrowing and populations are much more aware of what is taking place in all corners of the globe. People can communicate in real-time with others using text, audio and video content.

Social media can provide unique information that is not available over broadcast media. The latest news and eyewitness accounts are now almost exclusively found on social media platforms. This information is unfiltered, coming directly from the users first hand. This raw information is valuable and can paint a vivid picture of the effects happening on the ground in an emergency. Finally, it is also information provided in real-time. Social media is instant and it is possible to see from the



Credit: <http://micromappers.com/>

other side of the planet, events that occurred literally seconds ago. Whereas previously this would have required large news teams with



Credit: www.micromappers.com

expensive equipment, a simple cell phone connection will now provide this opportunity to any individual, in even the remotest of places.

This report outlines how and why organisations should use social media in emergency situations and highlights some of the key challenges in doing so, along with providing some key lessons learned.

How is social media being used by affected communities?

Social media encompasses many different types of activity, and is more than 'simply Facebook'. In an emergency context, and more generally, citizens use different social media platforms. This usage varies depending on context. Nonetheless some platforms are globally more prevalent than others. They have a variety of different uses.

Examples of social media and digital communication that are particularly relevant in the context of an emergency, according to the seminar speakers, are:

- **Blogs.** A personal medium which provides space for more extensive sharing of information and experiences. In an emergency, expanded details on the situation can be provided to followers and supporters of the blog.
- **Twitter.** Twitter is a tool which is ideal for sourcing breaking news. By utilising

hashtags on search terms i.e. #Disaster it is possible to find out information about a particular place, issue or situation before traditional broadcast media has had an opportunity to report it.

- **YouTube.** Moving beyond traditional text based communication, YouTube is one of many platforms that allows instant sharing of multimedia content. In an emergency this can be vital to directly show damage in affected areas or urgent needs.
- **Facebook.** Facebook is also a personal social media tool, but it also allows for networks to be created and nourished in the case of an emergency. *Pages* and *Groups* have been used in the past to fundraise, find missing people or just aggregate information coming from the affected areas.

How can we use social media as responders?

As a responder there are many ways to use social media in an emergency. While it is often used to broadcast information regarding agency activities, the presenters in the seminar believe it is also possible to use social media in connecting with affected communities in the following ways:

- **Analysing disaster content.** With modern smartphones it is possible to provide advanced data such as GPS coordinates, graphical data and videos on the ground to those carrying out needs assessments.
- **Social media to help assessing needs.** It is also possible to harvest information floating on social media networks in the form of images and video content post-disaster to formulate a picture of which areas are most badly affected and where aid is most urgently needed.

Case Study: Twitter saves lives in Japan



Naoko Utsumi from Japan was trapped on the roof of a community centre following the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in 2011. She had no access to phone services but had a computer. She managed to send an email to her husband and he in turn emailed their son, who lived in London. The son, understanding the urgency of her situation, sent a message via Twitter to the Deputy Governor of Tokyo with a detailed request for help.

The Tokyo Fire Department responded shortly after. Naoko and the children she was caring for were rescued. Without social media being utilised at such speed, this sort of life-saving rescue post-disaster may never have occurred.

Source and image credit: *Connecting the Last Mile* (InternewsEurope, 2013)

Section 1: Why use Social Media in an Emergency?

Social media is a powerful tool. In order to use it effectively in a disaster situation, organisations must have a clear understanding of why they are using it. The CDAC Network's 101 Seminar on Social Media in Emergencies went into great detail about the potential use of social media in emergencies. The presenters provided five top reasons why organisations should use social media in an emergency setting.

Use 1: To provide lifesaving information

Globally, the number of social media users is set to surge to over 2.5 billion people by 2017, according to digital market research company [eMarketer](#). With such a huge proportion of people utilising social media, it is becoming as common as email, telephone and radio as a communication channel.

In a disaster, agencies can reach out to huge audiences instantly through social media networks and provide lifesaving messages that can be shared beyond their immediate followers. Word travels fast over social media.

These tweets illustrate some of the different types of information that can be provided:



LESSONS LEARNED: 1

Context is Key

Knowing the context is vitally important before embarking on using social media in an emergency.

Each country has its own social media habits and preferred platforms. Their use may also be culturally specific. Some cultures may be more reserved than others and also have different expectations of what to expect from responders. In the USA, 75% of people utilising social media after hurricane Katrina expected a response within an hour.

It is important to check the information and communication landscape of a country to see how social media fits into the bigger picture, taking stock of traditional broadcast media. Social media use should be part of a multi-platform approach to communication.

Source: http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/START_SocialMediaUse_duringDisasters_LitReview.

LESSONS LEARNED: 2

The Importance of a Content Policy

One case study explored in the seminar took a real-life situation in which a disturbing video was posted on the page of an NGO operating in Syria.

Dealing with such a posting requires tact and subtlety as deleting such content or leaving it on a platform could have equally negative reactions from followers on either 'side' of this kind of potentially divisive activity. Taking no action is also an action and will get a reaction.

When a situation like this occurs, a Content Policy can guide how the organisation reacts to these sort of posts. For example, such a policy will enable an organisation to pre-define that disturbing or unverifiable content will be removed until verified. With this being public, it makes it easier to manage potentially difficult – especially when the policy is thorough and clear.

Use 2: To gather information useful for the response

Social media is not simply a broadcasting tool. Almost all social networks allow for a degree of dialogue and this facility for two-way communication is an effective way of gathering information, starting dialogue and asking affected communities about their situation. Creating open calls for information can also be effective at mobilising people to provide it, keeping in mind that expectations will need to be managed carefully in this case.

As well as active information gathering, it is possible to gather information passively by monitoring activity on social media networks. Gauge what information out there might be useful for you such as location information or broken services in terms of what you want to know, and then monitor, assess and analyse the channels. Rather than simply sucking in all of the relevant information, passive information gathering requires an effective filter to determine relevant content from irrelevant. This can be difficult in an emergency situation due to the timescales involved as well as the resources that are required to do this effectively.

This data can be plotted onto maps, aggregated for needs assessments, and many other things. It is one of the quickest ways of getting feedback on an aid agencies work which can help direct aid to where it's needed most.

Use 3: To engage affected communities

In an emergency, communities want to engage with those who can help them. For example, at a basic level people who have experienced any kind of trauma simply want to share information. They want to tell 'their story' and let responders know what their issues are and the challenges they are facing in the hope that aid providers can help them and also provide information so that others can also be helped. In turn survivors naturally want to be listened to. Social media creates a space for this dialogue and fosters this two-way engagement.

In particular, one of the expert presenters outlined that communities have been seen to demand focused action based on the information they have provided. When using twitter to directly address an aid organisation, rather hearing a general message explaining that 'help is on the way', people affected by crisis want to know, for example, whether a request for shelter to a particular village is being considered and if not, why not.

Engaging with communities in this way gives organisations greater ability to crowdsource information to direct their response efforts. Initiatives such as the Standby Task Force (SBTF) can help with this. The SBTF organises volunteers trained in ICT and digital technologies to deploy in emergencies. These volunteers assist with synchronising platforms, monitoring actionable reports, translation and verification of social media activity.¹

¹ <http://blog.standbytaskforce.com/about-2/what-we-do/>

In this regard, organisations must be prepared to manage expectations but also to be called accountable for what they are not able to provide.

While moving from 'broadcasting' (i.e. messaging out) via social media to dialogue is important, organisations must also be timely and responsive to genuinely engage with communities. If no response is heard quickly, people may assume that their feedback has not been heard. Timing is everything. On top of this, the information an organisation provides to communities has to be relevant for them otherwise it will be ignored. If this happens they will lose faith in the work of aid organisations and the work they are doing. Also, information or responses an organisation gets back from communities may contain criticism. This is something organisations should be ready for on social media platforms and they should be prepared to deal with it humbly and appropriately. A comprehensive social media strategy and content policy can help with this, as well as an organisational learning strategy that can inform on-going programming.

Share information: people want to provide feedback, but they also want information back once they have responded to requests via social media.

Use 4: To help communities to help themselves

Rather than simply restricting the concept of social media as something that occurs between an organisation and the community, organisations can also broker relationships between community members. By providing a trusted, virtual platform for users to discuss issues amongst themselves and confidently upload information, social media data can be utilised and mapped into a system that connects help needed with those citizens who are positioned to help in a crisis. For example, even by providing simple space on a Facebook page it is possible for citizens to communicate with each other and share their issues. It is in fact important to notice that local communities are the first responders and that they will offer and look for help no matter what international responder organisations do. Being able to tap into the already existing dialogue and to support local efforts to respond needs to be part of the international community's effort to support resilience.

Use 5: To manage expectations and let people know what you are doing

Even if it is not possible at any particular time to solve a problem, that doesn't mean that nothing can be communicated. If work is planned, this is also worth informing citizens about, letting them know that in time things will be done. Showing timelines can be useful to provide information on the process and it shows your followers that you are authentic.

When using social media, old messages get tired quickly. While advertising what you do is good, doing it too much can be annoying. Be timely and relevant with your outreach and try to include new information when it's relevant for your followers. Inform them of the latest events and your latest news, but don't overload them.

LESSONS LEARNED: 3

Don't Underestimate the Resources Required for Social Media

As it has emerged as an area of work, many organisations have simply appended social media to the duties of external communications staff.

Effective use of social media requires a strategy, proper planning and above all dialogue with other users. This all takes time. Managing criticism, effectively dealing with controversial posts, and being an open door for all relevant stakeholders goes beyond communications and can touch on all aspects of an organisation's work, from research and learning to policy.

Social media platforms are public spaces that can, depending on how they're approached, bring about huge success or failure. With this degree of importance, the resources required for effective social media use should not be underestimated. In some cases staff have to interact with up to hundreds of users – much beyond the capacity of one communications staff member.

Section 2: Challenges of using Social Media in Emergencies

Challenge 1: Strategy and Resources

Social media has been a key success factor for many organisations and businesses around the globe. In the media and online, stories are continually being shared about how an organisation has utilised social media to have a massive, exponential impact.

Those late to the game often do not delve into the theories behind online communication technologies and many in aid agencies and beyond believe:

- that they need to utilise social media immediately, regardless of their situation or plans
- that it guarantees them success in whatever they are doing without having to really do much aside from 'start tweeting'

This approach will more likely than not result in failure and could even have detrimental effects. Many organisations have either done this, or underutilised or ineffectively used social media in their emergency response. This comes at great risk of organisations under-resourcing the issue, inadequately supporting the communities they are speaking with and thus leaving them without information and support in a critical emergency situation.

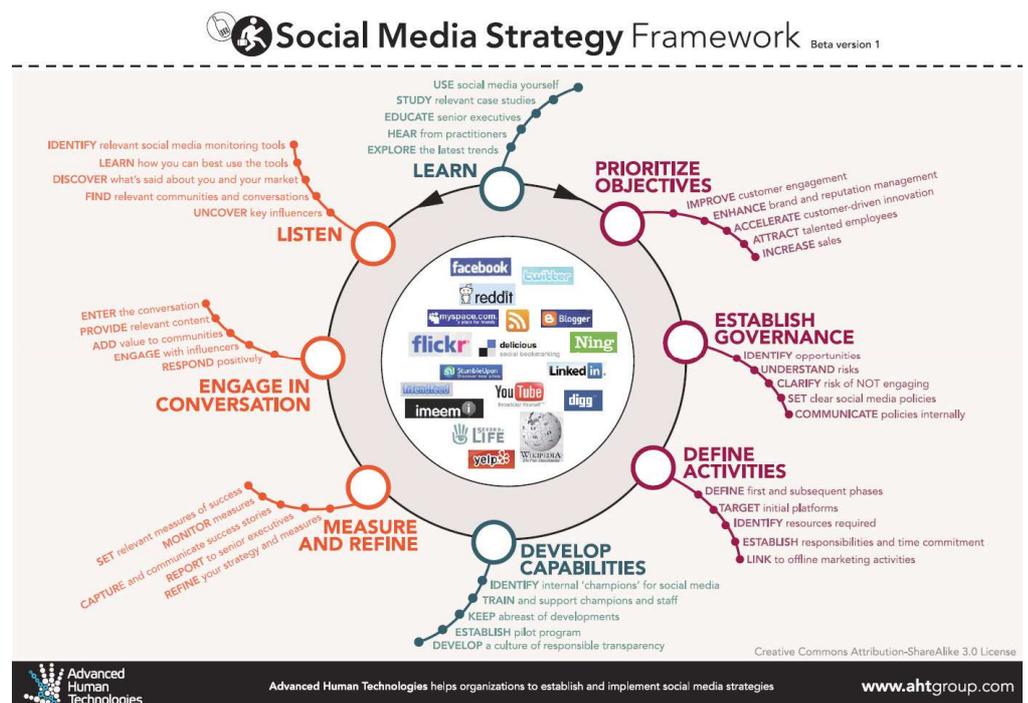


Figure 1: Source: Advanced Human Technologies

As made clear earlier in the report, a social media strategy is key for effective social media use. Such a strategy will need to take into account the context of the particular country and assess which platforms can be used towards which goals. Figure 1 on the previous page outlines key elements to include in a strategy.

Finding influencers and analysing how they are using social media is also important – strategies, rather than starting from a blank canvas, often have to build upon the platforms, hashtags or other elements used by key social media influencers in a particular context.

Capabilities and resources must also be assessed. Due to the range of possible activities, effectively engaging with social media takes effort and time. Figure 2 illustrates the sheer amount of content produced over social media every minute, illustrating how time-consuming it would be to analyse this in an emergency situation when users are generating content at a higher rate than usual.

While it can be resource heavy, using a social media tool like Hootsuite or Tweetdeck can ease the burden on staff taking on social media duties. These pieces of software allow for greater automation such as scheduled activity, notifications on mentions, and views that provide overviews on all key search terms and users.

Challenge 2: Trust and Verification

Verification is a key challenge when using social media in an emergency situation. How do you know that the information you're receiving through a social media platform is reliable?

In order to establish authenticity it is necessary to verify the:

- Setting or context
- Content
- Source

If the information is not authentic it can be considered either partially or totally falsified. From

the experience of the presenters, total falsification is less common as usually there is a grain of truth in the majority of stories. Partial falsification occurs more frequently. Content is often exaggerated for effect or information is taken out of context and can subsequently prove to be misleading.



Figure 2: Source: infographics.ws

LESSONS LEARNED: 4

Social Media is Not a Silver Bullet

While social media is a powerful tool it is not a silver-bullet; organisations cannot rely on it alone to communicate effectively in emergencies.

Social Media must be part of a larger communications strategy. In some disaster situations the presenters have seen low use of social media by displaced or disaster affected communities. This could be down to general technological habits or simply the lack of access to telecommunications services which social media relies on in an emergency. In this context, social media is less helpful.

When working through an overall communications strategy, it is also important to see how a social media interacts with traditional media such as radio and simply meeting face to face with communities. These elements are also vital at building trust.



Source: Bob Solis

There are many ways to verify content. Firstly, direct engagement with the user creating social media content is a very effective way of finding out more information and verifying its authenticity. Technical approaches can also be used, for instance by analysing the integrity of image/video content. Alternatively the presenters outlined how looking at the social network ID or other easily searchable information can shine more light on the authenticity of the content. Sometimes, reaching out to other users can be a good way to verify if a particular profile is legitimate or a scam. This can be done either via other users or also media outlets.

Challenge 3: Security and Privacy

During an emergency, information is often posted by a user about other individuals to help explain their difficult circumstance and seek help for them. Quite often content is included that is personal or private. This can be dangerous, particularly in situations of conflict and complexity. Releasing location information about vulnerable people without their consent is not advised as it can create unnecessary risk, and although users may have good intentions it is the responsibility of responders not to share this on, and also to educate users into using these platforms responsibly.

Challenge 4: Dealing with Negative Feedback

It is almost inevitable that when working with many citizens on public platforms that some will criticise your organisation or the work it does. Keep calm and do your best – it is, after all, inevitable and also healthy for your organisation. Don't lose your cool and respond in a clear and concise way, addressing their points. Professionalism and a human attitude will reflect well on you in the eyes of users generally.

There are things to gain from criticism. Firstly, try and understand where those who are being critical are coming from. Often the criticism points out genuine issues or communication problems that need to be addressed. If it does, take this on board. If the comments are misguided, work out why. Perhaps engaging and educating would assist or perhaps the fault lies with another issue beyond your control. If users continually respond aggressively, organisations should not waste resources trying to mend these relations. Such aggressive users won't ingratiate themselves with others either due to their attitude and thus will likely not be taken seriously.²

Concluding Remarks

Social media is a powerful tool that can be used to great effect in an emergency situation: not only as a tool for aid organisations, but foremost as tools for and by affected communities. Organisations need to carefully consider and research the social media landscape of the country in which they are working before embarking on using it. Only through developing a holistic communications strategy that includes a variety of communications methods will the social media element be fully effective. When well-resourced it will allow organisations to interact with affected communities better than before. Social media also allows organisations to harness a great deal of information and data that makes sense out of what is happening on the ground, particularly in the initial stages of an emergency.

This report outlines various key lessons learned from the day that proved particularly valuable to attendees. With the correct strategy, planning and research it is possible for even inexperienced organisations to become effective users of social media in an emergency context and reap the benefits for their response programme.

² <http://www.instantshift.com/2010/04/19/how-to-deal-with-negative-criticism/>

Resources and Links

Internews, 2013. Connecting the Last Mile:

http://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/resources/InternewsEurope_Report_Japan_Connecting%20the%20last%20mile%20Japan_2013.pdf

Data Never Sleeps <http://infographics.ws/data-never-sleeps-how-much-data-is-generated-every-minute/>

AHT Group: Social Media Strategies <http://ahtgroup.com/services/social-media-strategies>

UK Government – Using Social Media in Emergencies

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85946/Using-social-media-in-emergencies-smart-tips.pdf

Brian Solis – The Conversation Prism: <https://conversationprism.com/>

Why the emergency will not be twitted: <http://crisismapper.wordpress.com/2013/12/16/why-the-emergency-will-not-be-twitted/>

The conundrum of digital humanitarianism: when the crowd does harm:

<http://crisismapper.wordpress.com/2013/11/15/the-conundrum-of-digital-humanitarianism-when-the-crowd-does-harm>

Social Media for Emergencies 101: <http://crisismapper.wordpress.com/2013/12/09/social-media-for-emergencies-101/>

Ushahidi-Chile: an example of crowd sourcing verification of information:

<http://crisismapper.wordpress.com/2010/06/28/ushahidi-chile-an-example-of-crowd-sourcing-verification-of-information/>

Maps, the Power of the Crowd, and Big Data Verification: <http://innovation.internews.org/blogs/maps-power-crowd-and-big-data-verification>

Westgate attack and communication with communities: when trust is lost:

<http://innovation.internews.org/blogs/westgate-attack-and-communication-communities-when-trust-lost>

Listening to the crowd: verification of social media content (Power Point Presentation):

<http://www.slideshare.net/AnahiAyala/tech-a-tstate>

Communication with affected communities (Power Point Presentation):

<http://www.slideshare.net/AnahiAyala/c4-d-unicf>

Social Media for Public Health during emergencies (Power Point Presentation):

<http://www.slideshare.net/AnahiAyala/social-media-for-public-health-during-emergencies>