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THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

BY PETER LYN RENÉ

Social media is more than just looking at pictures, “liking” my friends’ posts or commenting on news feeds on my page; it is partly how I get my news. Before going to CNN or MSNBC, I see what is trending. In today’s world, social media is how a majority of our society communicates and receives daily news.

According to a Pew Research Center study, when you take into account both the total reach of a site (the share of Americans who use it) and the proportion of users who get news on the site (Anderson, Caumont, 2014), Facebook is the obvious news powerhouse among social media sites. Therefore, it is no surprise that social media has a strong and growing influence on emergency management. When disaster strikes, many look to social media for their initial source of information. It has become second nature to see what is trending (Holcomb, et. al. 2013). With that realization, disaster relief organizations now have a prominent presence on social media.

According to Rutrell Yasin, results from a Red Cross survey indicate 69 percent said emergency response agencies should regularly monitor their websites and social media networks so they can respond promptly to requests for help; 74 percent said they would expect help to arrive within an hour (Yasin, 2010). The government is fully engaged in social media with the majority of disaster relief



departments having a strong presence online. This makes it easier for these departments to respond to and communicate with other government agencies and the public.

On Aug. 27, 2015, Tropical Storm Erika devastated the island of Dominica. The storm wreaked havoc, causing extensive damage across the small island. The floods wiped out roads and swamped villages, with the costs of fixing homes, roads, bridges and other structures estimated to run into 10s of millions of dollars. With a large percentage of the infrastructure left in ruins, Dominica's Prime Minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, took to Facebook to keep Dominicans living abroad, and on the island, stay updated on the well-being of the people, the damage done to the dwellings and or businesses and the status of relief efforts. Without social media, it would have been extremely challenging for the Prime Minister to provide information.

The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA) issued almost daily Situation Reports about the tropical storm, which provided specific information about the widespread damage done to the island (CDEMA, 2015). These reports were just as prominent on Facebook and were a great source of information to families and loved ones abroad who were desperate for almost minute-by-minute updates of the happenings back home.

Hurricane Katrina remains one of the worst natural disasters in our country's history. When the hurricane destroyed parts of the Gulf Coast in 2005, Facebook was still a baby and Twitter wasn't even born. We relied on network and cable news for news and updates about the hurricane; we also relied on the Internet for up-to-the-minute information. However, when Hurricane Sandy slammed into the East Coast, Facebook, Twitter and other social media had become a valuable partner in disaster response and management (CNN Library. 2012). Social media allowed millions of Americans to stay informed, locate loved ones, notify authorities and express support.

Researchers have now started publishing data on the use of social media in disasters and lawmakers and security experts have begun assessing how emergency management can best adapt. The emergence and reliance on social media has fundamentally changed the way we prepare for and manage

disasters and emergencies (Maron, 2013). The old ways, such as the emergency broadcast system and other government programs, are not dead or abandoned; rather they have now been incorporated with social media.

For example, The White House took to Twitter to inform us that the president was receiving constant updates on Hurricane Sandy (The White House, 2012). On its Twitter page, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided updates on efforts and coordination with other agencies in its emergency relief efforts (FEMA, 2012). In its 2013 National Preparedness Report, FEMA indicated that individuals with Twitter accounts sent well more than 20 million tweets related to Hurricane Sandy. The report also indicated that tweets continued despite the fact that there was a significant loss of cellphone service during the height of the storm. According to Jorge Cardenas, vice president of asset management and centralized services for Public Service Electric and Gas Company, at one point during the storm they sent so many tweets to customers they exceeded their maximum daily amount of tweets.

The Boston Marathon bombings were another example of the role social media played in the emergency management of this disaster. An amazing quarter of our nation's population accessed Facebook, Twitter and other social media sites for information about the bombings. When the Boston Police Department posted its final "CAPTURED!" (Maron, 2013) tweet (Boston Police Department. (2013), more than 140,000 people retweeted it.

Social media has come to play a major role in emergency management. It has become an efficient way of sharing information between disaster relief and government organizations and citizens on the ground during times of emergencies. First, information generated and disseminated over social networks is incredibly valuable for disaster response. Second, the study of the relationships, behaviors and interactions in social networks may provide important insights for gathering information, planning evacuations and sheltering, and other rescue efforts.

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Peter Lyn René has a Bachelors in Political Science and a Masters in Law and Public Policy, and is currently a candidate for a Doctor of Philosophy in Law and Public Policy degree. He has an extensive background in Non-Profit Administration and Management, and Information Technology Project Management. He is a Consultant in Houston, Texas and is a Mediator having completed courses in Basic Mediation and Advance Family and Divorce Mediation in 2010, and is certified to mediate cases in the Justice of the Peace Courts, the County Courts, and the State District Courts as well. He volunteers his time mediating cases for the Harris County Dispute Resolution Center and has successfully mediated dozens of cases. He is the Chairman, and Chief Executive Officer of The Singing From The Soul Foundation, The Caribbean American Heritage Foundation of Texas and The Saint Lucia Foundation of Texas, all of which are 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations. He serves on the Executive Committee of the United Nations Council of Organizations. He has published articles in PA Times.