

**MAY 2, 2019**

## ***Using Social Media for Disaster Communications: Things to Consider***

By Dr. Christa Remington, Assistant Professor, Public Administration

You may be reading this post on your phone. It may have popped up on Facebook or Twitter. If that's the case then you know that social media has become part of our lives. Can social media, then, change the way governments disseminate—and residents receive—crucial information during times of disaster?

After all, it is precisely at these times when it is vital that members of the public receive timely and accurate information. This must happen during all four phases of emergency management—response, recovery, mitigation, and preparedness. Successful emergency communication is critical for the preservation of lives and property, and for reducing the chaos and public panic inherent in disasters. Additionally, providing the public with useful alerts and information enables citizens to be more self-sufficient and enhances their decision-making processes, thereby alleviating the burden on emergency response personnel.

For the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government relied only on radio communication, news print, and word of mouth to disseminate warnings about potential emergencies and the resources available after a disaster. During the 1950s, television took over as the main way that the public was made aware of upcoming weather hazards. Local and national news stations and specialty stations, such as ***The Weather Channel***, are still used today to provide reliable and verified information to viewers.

Over the past decade, social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram have become integrated in the day-to-day lives of much of the public, while access to the Internet and smart devices have been trending toward ubiquity. These changes have impacted every area of life and caused us to ask, *what is the best way to communicate emergency information in a way that is clear, accurate, and useful?*

In our current era, social media has become a primary way in which the public connects with, contextualizes, and responds to what is happening in our world. Social media outlets, particularly when used on mobile devices, allow for instant connectivity to news, knowledge, and public opinion on a platform that is familiar to citizens. Social media offers a bottom-up approach to news, where the information is created by the people closest to the event, resulting in an intricate word-of-mouth network where pieces of information are shared and spread freely and instantly. These outlets allow emergency managers to spread a consistent and unfiltered message directly to citizens before, during, and after a disaster. Additionally, social media serves as a back-up for first responders to receive information and allows community members to connect with others in need.

Social media allows information to be disseminated faster and more continuously than ever before, which is critical because disaster conditions can change rapidly. Research also shows that social media usage dramatically increases during a disaster. In most instances, social media is also available when there is no electricity, which gives it an advantage over more traditional communication methods, like landlines or television, which are limited by power failures.

Although relatively new, social media has already shown to be of great benefit in saving lives after a disaster. **During Hurricane Harvey in 2017**, emergency officials were able to receive requests for help from citizens around the area through social media even though phone lines and 911 services were limited or down. After the storm, Twitter was used to locate stranded victims and coordinate rescue efforts. Facebook and YouTube not only provided coverage and videos of the disaster, but also directed people on where they could volunteer or donate funds.

**Citrus County Chronicle**  
September 10, 2017 · 🌐

**BREAKING NEWS:** Hurricane Irma is now forecast to pass through Citrus County tonight and early Monday as a low-level Category 1, significantly reducing the potential for wind damage county wide, sheriff's spokesman Lee Alexander said. Officials also believe Citrus will experience a coastal storm surge similar to that of Hurricane Hermine a year ago, but not the worst-case scenarios that the storm's projected path indicated just 12 hours ago.

👍 Like    💬 Comment    ➦ Share

👍❤️😄 659

784 shares

Oldest ▾

View previous comments...

 **Dana Marie Herbert**  
Should older mobiles be able to withstand the wind?

1y Like Reply



NWS Houston @NWS... · 10/30/18

A majority of SE TX is under an enhanced risk for severe weather tomorrow!! Q: What does an "enhanced" risk mean? A: Numerous severe storms will be possible. The following graphics break down the severe thunderstorm risk categories to help you better prepare and stay aware! #txwx



2 20 29

As with any new innovation, there are successes, failures, and lessons to be learned. So what are some things to consider when using social media for disaster communication?

1. Instantaneous and unverifiable outlets for news, such as social media, can quickly become breeding grounds for false information, raising serious questions of *credibility*. Given the proliferation of fake news and clickbait on social media, the credibility of news sources has become a challenge for emergency management administrators. This false information can give way to mass hysteria and panic which can complicate rescue and recovery efforts. In the case of the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, misleading reports that multiple bombs were yet to be detonated spread rapidly, causing public panic and overwhelming the city's cell and communication systems. It is essential that news outlets and public sources of information strengthen their brand, post frequently, and increase visibility to create trust among residents and reduce the desire to check unverified sources for emergency information.

2. Let's remember that access to social media, and to the internet more generally, isn't universal. Groups such as the elderly, immigrants, low income families, and the homeless may not have access to the internet or to a mobile device,

and may not readily navigate these sites even if they could gain access. In order to reach these groups, more traditional and time-consuming measures (such as door-to-door canvassing and area blanketing) may be necessary.

Although social media platforms are free of charge, successfully utilizing them takes skill and experience to monitor, assess, and respond to posts and to quickly clarify misinformation. This further drains resources that could be used for other crucial functions. Despite this, it is clear that social media is now a mainstay of public communication and should be an important part of an emergency manager's toolkit. Issues surrounding credibility and access must be addressed so that all members of the public can receive clear, accurate, and easily accessible information in an emergency.