

Social Media in Times of Crisis

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The contemporary world in which we live, work, and travel has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years, in large part based on the development, commercialization, and infusion of advanced technologies into our daily lives. While some countries and regions continue to be first movers in the implementation of these technologies, the pace at which developing nations are becoming technologically enabled is noteworthy.

The ability to communicate in an effective and efficient manner represents an essential component of both economic development and quality of life. The age of highly capital-intensive land-based telephone systems has been revolutionized through the advent of cellular phones, the Internet, and social media. These technologies are changing how individuals, businesses, governments, and the news media communicate with various stakeholder groups.

This paper examines how the advent of the Internet and social media are changing communication patterns during times of crisis. In times of natural disasters and other emergency situations, various stakeholder groups will seek information that is accurate, credible, and timely regarding what has happened, what is currently happening, and what is likely to happen. While these stakeholders have traditionally relied on the news media to gather and disseminate this information in the form of status updates, alerts, and at times information regarding actions that the public should take to ensure their safety, the reality is that anyone equipped with a smart phone now has the ability to become a "reporter" in terms of capturing and disseminating real-time images and commentaries regarding an event happening within their community. They may choose to share the images that they have captured with a limited number of close friends or a much larger audience through the auspices of Facebook or YouTube.

The traditional news media has recognized the value of social media and the Internet as communication platforms and encourage members of their audience to send in digital images and videos that they have captured for possible inclusion in their news coverage. Government and public safety organizations have recognized the strategic value of the Internet and social media as they engage in mission-critical communications with stakeholders before, during, and after the occurrence of an emergency situation. Business and non-profit organizations have likewise incorporated the use of the Internet and social media in their risk management, contingency, and emergency communication plans.

A central theme must be how the aforementioned organizations and the public can collaborate to ensure that information dissemination during times of crisis meets the necessary and appropriate expectations that all such communication be accurate, credible, and timely. A professional approach to using social media in times of crisis will enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the management and mitigation of these situations through the provision of accurate, credible, and timely information.

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