Managing Crisis and Disaster in a Connected Digital World

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Managing Crisis & Disaster in a Connected Digital World

By Wayne P. Bergeron

#SafetyBeforeSelfie – Please make sure to exit the burning building before texting, tweeting, posting, or live streaming about it. Surprisingly, the current security and emergency management (EM) environment that exists both in the public and increasingly in the private sector may necessitate such emergency warning statements as part of EM organizations’ risk communication planning.

In an increasingly interconnected world, vast knowledge that the world has produced is available in an easily accessible and on-demand format from almost anywhere. Combined with the ability to constantly connect with any past friends and acquaintances (or those one desires to know) through social media and online communication platforms, people are living in a time and age that has no real historical parallel. Of course, what is actually done with that capability on a daily basis generally does not reach society’s full potential.

Opportunities & Challenges

The current environment should enable EM capabilities that far exceed anything that has ever been seen before, with a level of achievability and economic affordability that should satisfy most public managers. However, the truth is much more nuanced. Therefore, the very capabilities, technologies, and breakthroughs that provide these advantages also potentially create or expose a set of challenges, vulnerabilities, and liabilities that most have likely not seen or not fully considered.

This interplay of opportunities and challenges creates a unique security environment and ecosystem that demands a level of understanding and a comprehensive security and EM approach that, in many cases, is only in its infancy in most organizations for routine operations and conditions, and is likely nonexistent for crisis/disaster and response situations. This reality needs to change quickly given the potential enormity of the consequences.

Social Media in Crisis & Disaster

For better or worse, social media and the digitally connected world have in many ways changed the nature of how humans interact and communicate. These changes also have a profound effect on what are currently considered the necessary elements of good living and reasonable quality of life. In many developed countries, internet access and broadband connectivity are being increasingly prioritized and regulated as a form of public utility akin to water and electricity versus a luxury commodity. Highlighting this was this 2016 U.S. judicial majority opinion:

Over the past two decades, this content [internet] has transformed nearly every aspect of our lives, from profound actions like choosing a leader, building a career, and falling in love to more quotidian ones like hailing a cab and watching a movie.
Beyond the domain of individuals, many forward-thinking companies and organizations are also beginning to realize the value of social media technology. These technologies and approaches are becoming a critical part and, in some cases, an existential part of business models and organizational structures. Although many of these approaches are being “hard-wired” into organizational structures and cultures, the security considerations and potential threat and vulnerability impacts are, in many cases, lagging behind. This then creates significant hazard exposure for many EM organizations, with the true nature and extent of risk being largely unknown.

Although individual platforms depicted in Figure 1 may change or increase/decrease in use and popularity, the fundamentals of social media use are largely universal. As such, organizations, agencies, and businesses must consider these fundamentals in their crisis and disaster planning as well as daily operations – in terms of providing core services and functions, as well as security for the organization and its employees. For crisis and disaster situations, social media provides a robust set of communication tools – with some inherently unique capabilities – that have mostly been unavailable outside the realm of the largest and most capable EM organizations.

Beyond two-way communication capabilities – when combined with aggregation, analytical tools, and data mining – social media can become a valuable source of intelligence information and situational awareness without the need to deploy sensors or reporting assets. In response to disasters, a simple capability such as geolocation (with some limitations and caveats) can assist in search and rescue operations, and geolocated photos provide real-time damage assessment capability that can far exceed traditional methods.

Beyond immediate response and recovery operations, social media platforms provide capability for just-in-time training for protective action procedures as well as video coverage of events. All of these capabilities, when properly integrated, greatly enhance an organization’s crisis and disaster response capability.

Social Media Management Strategy

When integrating these capabilities, though, the challenge for many agencies and organizations is developing a suitable social media strategy that fits particular organizational needs. Although platforms and technologies may be new, novel, or different, a social media strategy is still a media management strategy that must adhere to the basic tenets of the organization’s outcomes and objectives. Key components for social media in crisis and disaster include:

- **Degraded connectivity and communications capability in crisis and disaster situations must be assumed and planned for.** Graphic-rich formats, embedded video, etc. that work well during normal operations generally become an impediment to effective communication during periods of degraded and limited communication capability. Having a pre-configured plan to switch to alternate lower bandwidth, less graphical, and text-based formats should be considered and planned for.

- **A social media and internet communications strategy is more than just a website or social media page.** The strategy must be comprehensive and encompass the breadth and range of platforms that constituents and customers are likely to use on a daily basis and likely to default to in crisis and disaster.
• *EM agency and organizational social media operations must be monitored, updated, and moderated to be effective.* Discovering months-old information on a platform when searching for relevant organizational information during a crisis or disaster impedes response.

• *Organizations need to communicate on multiple platforms.* To reach disparate audiences, organizations must utilize multiple messages and multiple formats appropriate to both situation and desired outcome.

• *In terms of management and implementation, even in small organizations, social media should not be considered merely an additional duty given to the newest or youngest employee.* The social media management strategy should garner as much attention as other core operations functions.

• *Social media messaging in crisis and disaster must be relevant and consistent.* This includes messaging across platforms and media types and synching organizational objectives and desired outcomes.

**The Good, the Bad & the Ugly (of Social Media)**

For individuals, the self-oriented world can lead to comments and online attention contributing to perceptions of importance, status, fame, etc. For organizations and many high-profile individuals, more clicks, comments, “likes,” “pokes,” and shares do not necessarily equal overall effectiveness in the social media world. An organization is as likely to have viral content related to lapses, mistakes, indiscretions, and bad behavior of the organization, its employees, and associates as it is for outstanding performance activity.

Additionally, unlike face-to-face interaction, the impersonal and sometimes anonymous nature of online communications and interactions can lead to bad behavior and encourage the emotionalization and escalation of events that might otherwise be easily handled if conducted in person. In some cases, “people” online may not be who they say they are and, in some cases, may not be people at all – for example, “botnets,” automated responses, and “clickbait” server farms.

The strengths of social media engagement for organizations can also be the greatest potential weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Although a robust social media strategy and active engagement allows organizations to “speak” directly to constituents, customers, and stakeholders, in crisis and disaster, many organizations find that, as the level of engagement and number of followers explodes exponentially, their capability to effectively and efficiently manage those interactions become incredibly difficult. In such situations, the increased social media presence becomes a double-edged sword and can be particularly difficult for small and lean staffed organizations to handle.
An additional challenge in the social media world is the increasing propensity for self-selection and filtering of content, particularly in daily and pre-crisis environments. This can also be exacerbated by the algorithmic nature of many social media network operating systems and policies, which tend to steer members toward similar sites such as those that they have already shown a propensity to favor. However, this is not as big of a consideration in the immediate aftermath of a crisis and disaster situation as users tend to search for relevant content that reaches their perspective needs and is not the case with all social media platforms. This can also be mitigated with multi-platform engagement.

Somewhat related to the self-filtering phenomenon is that the nature of social media interaction – with its inherent “trusted relationship” status between social media “friends” and connections – in many cases, cultivates the perfect environment for creating, propagating, and circulating conspiracy theories. As a result, there are entire organizations, media outlets, and businesses that have been created just to debunk these theories – for example, Snopes, FactCheck.org, and PolitiFact.

Social Media “Truths”

In social media and online interaction, the nature of the truth can change daily. However, organizations should consider some guiding principals when operating in the social media realm, especially during times of crisis and disaster. The first factor to consider is that, unlike traditional media sources and outlets such as radio, television, print, etc., social media is largely a “pull” medium. Thus, followers and users must specifically seek specific platforms, channels, and sites.

The idea of passive exposure to social media content is highly unlikely for most EM organizations. One caveat to this in crisis and disaster, however, is the increasing tendency of traditional media outlets (especially broadcast and online) to use social media postings from government, EM organizations, agencies, and even private individuals as primary sources in emerging crisis and disaster situations. This tendency provides a unique opportunity for an organization to position itself as an early authoritative source to fill the critical information void in the first minutes and hours after disaster and crisis. An additional advantage is that the organization can largely communicate directly with the public in an unfiltered manner. However, this capability could have unintended consequences, with the need to later counteract some of the unfiltered communications.

As mentioned previously, followers will increase rapidly both during the run-up to a pending crisis or disaster as well as in its immediate aftermath, which can seriously strain organizational resources dedicated to social media engagement activities. Of course, almost as quickly as followers are onboarded to social media sites and platforms during crisis and disaster, they often begin separating themselves soon afterward. Innovative organizations may be able to cultivate these followers as part of its social media base.

Finally, given the unregulated nature of social media and the online communication environment, EM organizations should anticipate being unable to fully control (or control at all) the information environment surrounding a crisis and disaster situation. Multiple players will have differing agendas, motives, and desired outcomes for engagement – and not all of them in the affected organization’s best interest. Criminals and scammers also occupy the social media space and may compete directly with legitimate organizations and entities.
**Implications/Outlook for the Future**

For social media in crisis and disaster, the only real constant is constant change. Users and followers likewise are constantly changing their likes, habits, and consumption patterns, which means organizations must tailor their communications to multiple audiences, multiple mediums, and multiple messages. While doing this, it is imperative that organizational information is planned for in an in-depth and comprehensive manner, with social media platforms complementing rather than replacing traditional media.

Another reality that goes beyond social media but is greatly enabled by it is the ubiquity of sensors and devices. Many people possess both a camera and the capability to instantly upload or broadcast images, videos, and audio. In many high-profile incidents, this ability has proven critical in defining and countering the narrative of EM agencies and organizations. As such, officials must assume that every interaction of its agents and employees will be captured, shared, and broadcasted in crisis and disaster situations, particularly when they are controversial or show the organization in a bad light. EM organizational social media strategy, policy, operations, and management simply cannot be an additional duty or part-time job, but rather planned for well before a crisis or disaster occurs and carefully managed once it does.

**Some Final Thoughts**

The EM world is always changing and evolving, but social media and emerging technologies tend to move faster and further than organizations can anticipate their impact and react to them. EM organizations must determine whether embracing these new systems and technologies would benefit their missions, goals, and objectives, and enhance organizational safety, security, and effectiveness of response, especially considering that many of these new additions come with significant staffing and manpower impacts, maintenance costs, and other possible unforeseen mandates, liabilities, and lifecycle costs.

In addition, a new technology or capability could increase expectations of the organization’s capability, which would be challenging especially in the early stages of adoption since many systems and technologies come with a significant learning curve and a gap between initial expectations and operational capability. Care must be taken to ensure that there is no lapse in organizational effectiveness in such circumstances.

Ultimately, some of the biggest opportunities when it comes to leveraging social media and emerging technology are likewise some of the biggest potential challenges and threats going forward within the EM realm, and even more so when crisis or disaster strikes. Ignoring or discounting potential challenges and threats could lead to critical vulnerabilities and points of failure, not only in terms of an immediate situation but even more so in the mid to long term. Now is the time to address them.

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