

# Social media and risk communication

Following an online survey, **Dr Tim L Tinker, Michael Dumlao, Grant McLaughlin, and David Fouse** analyse the use and importance of social media technology

## EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Professionals in government, commercial enterprises and not-for-profit organisations have built a strong reputation based on years of public service and take great pride in building, establishing and nurturing a distinctive, stewardship-oriented identity. Yet how effective have we been in communicating, even advancing, our mission and messages before, during and after a crisis? How are we perceived by critical audiences at the consumer and partner level during crises? What is working in our organisation's current crisis and risk communication programme, and where might our strategies and practices fall short in protecting our reputation, credibility and public trust? These are the questions we must evaluate continually to prepare ourselves as emergency management professionals to communicate effectively in an environment of constantly changing communication rules.

Recent times have seen unprecedented demand placed on emergency management professionals to communicate in clear, accurate and authoritative terms. Being 'communication ready' has come to mean more than having quick answers for the media or instructions for the

general public in the face of a real or perceived threat. It is as important to understand how new and advanced tools, such as social media, are changing the landscape for communicating effectively. While some organisations have been harnessing the social media wave effectively to communicate risk and crisis messages to broader audiences, most are experiencing challenges and opportunities in leveraging what is often perceived as a new and exciting social phenomenon, but which is enigmatic and unpredictable in many ways.

## UNFAMILIAR DOMAIN

Social media constitutes a non-traditional information vehicle and an unfamiliar domain to many in the emergency management community. Moreover, social media utilises some of the most rapidly evolving technology, leaving many emergency managers grappling to keep up. Hence, social media is not yet universally accepted as a standard tool for emergency communication.

Recognising these challenges and opportunities, a consortium of US-based agencies and organisations, including Booz Allen Hamilton Inc, the American Public Health

Association, International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) and the National Association of Government Communicators conducted a web survey. This was designed to examine the many facets of social media during times of crisis, such as the types of tools and their primary use and effectiveness, barriers to their use, and the co-ordination of social media with broader communication strategies.

The survey was conducted with a sample of 9,000, of which 541 individuals and/or organisations responded. It is our hope that the survey results will be a catalyst for further discussion and provide a starting point for assessing and developing enhanced social media strategy development and practices.

**■ Use of social media tools:** Among all respondents, a slight majority indicated that they did not use any social media tools for communicating public health issues or emergencies. These tools included Facebook, Twitter, blogs, SMS messaging, Wikis etc.

**■ Length of time using social media tools:** Consistent with the public's increased use of social media, slightly more than one-third of the respondents have been using these tools less than one year, and more than 75 per cent have less than three years of experience using them.

**■ Primary communication use:** When asked how organisations used their social media tools, nearly two-thirds of the respondents used them to communicate only externally or both externally and internally. Less than one-third used social media tools only within their organisations.

**■ Types of social media tools:** Social networking (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn) account for the largest percentage of tools used by survey respondents, with blogs in a close second place. Virtual worlds, mobile websites, social bookmarking, widgets, and image sharing are less utilised at under 20 per cent.

**■ Social media strategy co-ordination:** Nearly half of the respondents use a combination of one department leading social

media co-ordination, while each department oversaw its own social media use.

**■ Goals using social media:** Respondents placed a slightly greater importance on educating the public as a goal for using social media. Affecting public behaviour/encouraging public action also garnered a solid response.

**■ Evaluating effectiveness:** A large majority of survey respondents are not evaluating the effectiveness of their organisation's social media use.

**■ Evaluation tools:** When evaluation metrics are used, a large majority of participants used web analytics. Online comments, surveys, and word of mouth were used to a lesser degree for evaluation.

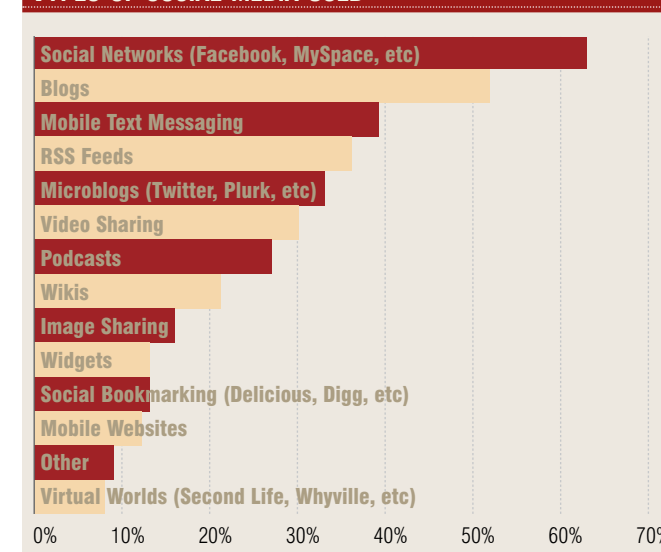
**■ Barriers to use:** With strong majorities, survey participants identified the key obstacles that limit their organisation's use of social media. These include other competing priorities, including staff, time/capacity, level of familiarity and organisation culture. The results seem to validate the response to the first survey question – more than half of the respondents are not using social media tools.

The survey reveals that with challenges come opportunities. Emergency management professionals can do a lot now to move toward a communication framework that encompasses all effective vehicles, including social media. In today's information environment, no organisation can rely on their website to be the sole source of information and forum for discussions about an incident. Nor can organisations assume that they are the sole, primary knowledge producers of expertise. The reality is that citizens far removed from official channels will create and share their own knowledge; social media enables users to connect their content to a vast, multipliable social network, which simply exacerbates the potential for the propagation of rumours and myths.

Social media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are popular and influential because they ease the human need to create and connect. It is imperative that emergency communicators not only monitor the information shared across social media, but engage the dialogue to help shape the conversation. Social media engagement requires a genuine partnership with users with blogs and audiences, who post first-hand videos and images to YouTube and Flickr, as well as social networks with the potential to reach the otherwise 'unreachable' and thereby broaden and diversify outreach.

With co-ordinating policies and practices, multiple organisations could pool critical information, expertise, and

## TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USED



resources for wide distribution. Public-private partnerships provide further opportunities for enhanced communication, whether in training, strategy development, system design and implementation, messaging, or stakeholder engagement.

Over 75 per cent of American citizens have access to the internet, and with the growing demise of print and other traditional media, have turned increasingly to the internet as their primary source of information. Note also the fast adoption of smart phones with access to online content, and the reality that these devices will soon eclipse the personal computer as the consumer's most frequently accessed computing device. While the public has flocked to these tools as necessities, the emergency community has just begun to catch up. However, as the survey data suggests, there is a definite trend towards adoption and, more importantly, strategic implementation.

## ACCURATE INFORMATION

That emergency managers use social media primarily to communicate externally and then choose social networking sites, like Facebook, as their gateway to social media is no surprise. Emergency communication is, after all, a social activity that involves a variety of communities that need to act in concert. However, the prevalent and exclusive use of social media to broadcast information to large audiences fails to tap into the full potential of social media as a tool for both outreach and collaboration. As the data suggests, only 14-17 per cent of emergency managers use social media for anything other than a traditional one-way broadcasting tool.

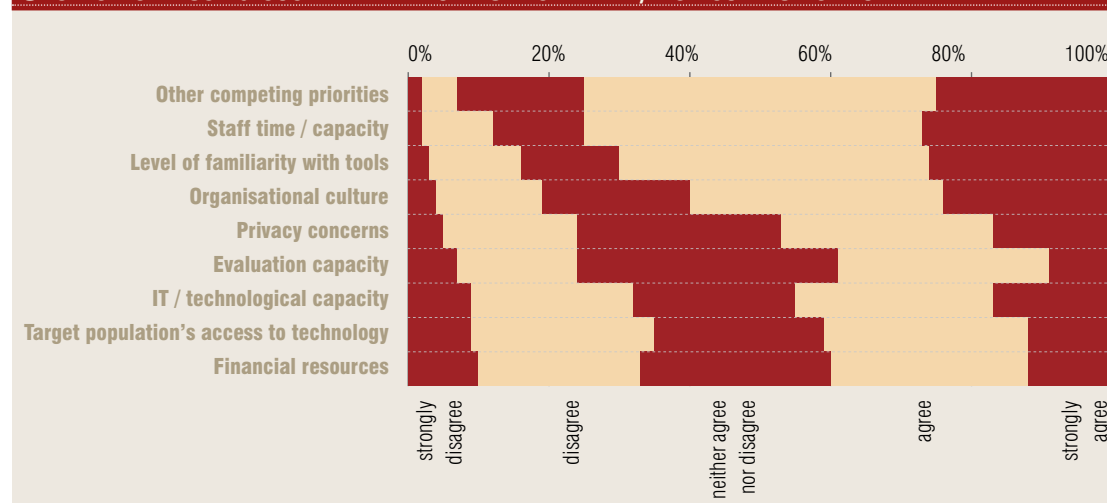
Furthermore, most organisations do not seem to evaluate their social media engagements. While software that measures social media efficacy is as newly developed as the media

it tries to monitor (such as Facebook's Lexicon – which graphs the frequency of words in status updates and can help media professionals observe public sentiments and perceptions), it is worrisome that some type of metric is not applied throughout the lifecycle of a social media campaign. One way to measure success is to engage the social networks in an active dialogue about the efficacy of a campaign; an activity that recalls the previous statement that social media is best employed as a tool for two-way dialogue, rather than just a new broadcasting system.

All in all the data is encouraging for the role of social media in emergency communication. The time is fast approaching when social media will simply become 'media'. Some say that time is now here, particularly in light of the recent flu outbreak where the most dynamic and contentious social and communication activity happened not in mainstream media, but on Twitter and Facebook. While discussion of 'Flu 2.0' merits an entirely separate paper, one can quickly conclude that in no other (recent) scenario was the importance of engaging citizens on these platforms more poignant. Here were millions of geographically dispersed citizens from across the world using digital tools to share information both accurate and, in some cases, dangerously false. It is laudable that the Centre for Disease Control engaged these forums as a source of information, and that the media quickly reported on the rumours in an effort to correct them, demonstrates the importance of collaboration between the 'new' and the 'old' forms of communication. But above all, the recent outbreak also showed the power of social media to reveal the concerns, fears and, ultimately, resolve of people who often want little more than an assurance that the information they have is accurate. **CRJ**

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## OBSTACLES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC HEALTH/RISK COMMUNICATION



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