

**ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA  
IN  
CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

Gitanjali Laad, MBA

Gerald Lewis, Ph.D.

January 2012

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It should be acknowledged that most of the work was done by Gitanjali Laad. My input was primarily direction, suggestion, organization and editing while she did the research and writing.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with as part of her graduate work at Clark University. She is a gifted and talented individual and as is often (but not always) the case when teaching graduated students, I learned a great deal while “directing” her independent study.

Gerald Lewis, Ph.D.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4-5</b>
<b>3. SOCIAL MEDIA BASICS.....</b>	<b>5-9</b>
a. SOCIAL MEDIA & WEB 2.0 – MEANING & DEFINITION.....	5
b. SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS .....	6
c. SOCIAL MEDIA – A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW.....	7
<b>4. POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA .....</b>	<b>9-13</b>
a. BROADCASTING.....	9
b. GLOBAL PRESENCE WITH A LOCAL FLAVOR.....	10
c. MARKETING & ADVERTISING.....	11
d. POLITICS.....	12
<b>5. FOUR STAGES OF CRISIS AND SOCIAL MEDIA .....</b>	<b>13-14</b>
<b>6. SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS TRADITIONAL MEDIA .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>7. ERA OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM .....</b>	<b>15-18</b>
a. WHAT IS IT? .....	15
b. WHO IS DOING IT?.....	16
c. HOW DOES IT WORK?.....	16
d. WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?.....	17
e. WHAT ARE THE DOWNSIDES? .....	17
<b>8. SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES .....</b>	<b>18-19</b>
<b>9. FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>10. CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>11. ABOUT THE AUTHORS.....</b>	<b>20</b>

## 1. ABSTRACT

Social media, which began as a mode through which individuals may communicate with others has now evolved to critical element in emergency and crisis response. The recent political unrest in the Middle East, earthquake in Japan, riots in London and mass shooting at Virginia Tech are clear demonstrations that social media are a force that cannot be ignored. In times of crisis, Social Media gives the ability to communicate quickly and effectively revolutionizing the manner in which people communicate and gather information about stories and topics that are of interest to them. Organizations are increasingly implementing Social Media strategies as a part of their crisis management planning. With the right tools in place, there's no doubt that Social Media can play an important role in crisis communication. Several organizations are advocating for the use of social media, but often find this very challenging given the lack of confidentiality, circulation of non-verified information, number of channels, poor crafting of messages, and so on.

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of all aspects of the current (positive and negative) issues surrounding this new and evolving communication revolution.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

The world is awash in media; with televisions in bedrooms, phones in pockets, and tablet computers inside pocketbooks. According to Internet World Statistics, there are 272 million Internet users in the US.<sup>1</sup> Nielsen and NM Incite report that Social Media sites and blogs reach 80% of all active US Internet users.<sup>2</sup> The rapid growth of social networking sites (referred to as Social Media) such as Facebook, Google Plus, YouTube and others have attracted considerable attention. It is a medium of communication that allows information to be transmitted on a global scale, reaching millions around the world, with relevant messages within a fraction of a minute.

Social Media truly breaks down walls. It allows us to communicate our thoughts, connect with people across the globe and often know them better than our next-door neighbor. Social Media has an ever-increasing accessibility that has allowed it to gain a pivotal role in many people's lives and serve a number of functions.

With the rise in Social Media, it appears that corporate communication has been democratized. The power has been taken from those in marketing and public relations by the individuals and communities that create, share, and consume blogs, tweets, facebook entries, movies, pictures and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Companies are increasingly adopting Social Media to reach out to customers, demonstrate new products, fulfill customer service requests, acquire, develop and retain talent. Social Media has definitely changed communication and crisis response. Organizations are increasingly implementing Social Media strategies as a part of their crisis management planning. Social Media tools are determining how news about crises is communicated,

---

<sup>1</sup> Internet World Statistics (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.internetworldstats.com/america.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Nielsen, & NM Incite. (2011). Social Media Report: Spending Time, Money and Going Mobile Social Media Report: Spending Time, Money and Going Mobile, Q3 2011. Retrieved from [http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online\\_mobile/social-media-report-spending-time-money-and-going-mobile/](http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/social-media-report-spending-time-money-and-going-mobile/)

<sup>3</sup> Kietzmann, H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I., & Silvestre, B. (2011). Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of Social Media. *Business Horizons*. Volume 54, Issue 3, May 2011, Pages 241-251

reactions are shared, and responses are coordinated across the globe. According to the American Red Cross Survey, “Americans are relying more and more on Social Media, mobile technology and other news outlets to learn about ongoing disasters, seek help and share information about their well-being after emergencies.”<sup>4</sup> Leysia Palen, a computer scientist at the University of Colorado, Boulder supports the claim made by the American Red Cross. “When people are under threat, perceived or actual, they go into this intensified information seeking period.”<sup>5</sup> Accessibility and convenience are the success factors to gathering information from this medium of communication. The general public can now freely discover, create, read, and distribute content.

This paper briefly examines Social Media's new role in crisis management and response. The Social Media concepts, examples and content used in this paper are tailored to crisis management and response. This includes definitions of Social Media, the power of Social Media, benefits of utilizing Social Media with examples, comparison between Social Media and traditional media, challenges posed by Social Media and finally a presentation of successful Social Media models and frameworks used in crisis response.

### 3. SOCIAL MEDIA BASICS

#### a. SOCIAL MEDIA & WEB 2.0 – MEANING & DEFINITION

The proliferation of Social Media has been astounding; however, the meaning is still unknown to many. So, “What does Social Media really mean?” Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define Social Media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content.”<sup>6</sup>

Renowned researcher, Boyd provides a broader definition and classifies social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.<sup>7</sup>

The American Public Health Association refers to “Social Media as the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, enabling the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of audience and content producers.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> American Red Cross (2011). Social Media in Disasters and Emergencies. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/portal/site/en/menuitem.94aae335470e233f6cf911df43181aa0/?vgnnextoid=7a82d1efe68f1310VgnVCM10000089f0870aRCRD>

<sup>5</sup> Winerman, L. (2009). Crisis Communication. *New Feature Nature*, 22 January 2009, Volume 457

<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, A., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, Volume 53 (1), Pages 59–68

<sup>7</sup> Boyd, M. & Ellison, N. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), Article 11. Retrieved from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

<sup>8</sup> Currie, D. (2009). Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During times of Crisis: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities. *Special Report by Booz Allen Hamilton, the American Public Health Association, the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, International Association of*

Web 2.0 is a term that was first used in 2004 to describe new ways in which software developers and end users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion. Web 2.0 is the platform for the evolution of Social Media.<sup>9</sup>

Ian Thomas, Director, Microsoft Digital Advertising solution refers to Web 2.0 as a change in the shape of the web.<sup>10</sup> According to Tim Berners-Lee's, W3C Director, Web 2.0 is the read-write web, often used as a way of explaining what exactly Web 2.0 means. The first implementation, Web 1.0, could be considered the "read-only web." In other words, the early web allowed us to search for information and read it. There was very little in the way of user interaction or content contribution. Web 2.0 is all about interaction and contribution. Simply put, users are able to interact with one another or contribute content. There are several diverse tools used in Social Media for communication. Knowledge and use of the tools that make most sense to implement and meet the current needs are critical to any crisis communication plan.

#### b. SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Social Media comprises a wide range of online forums including social networking, social bookmarking, blogs, micro-blogging, general intellectual property rights sharing, internet discussion boards and forums, sites containing digital audio, images, movies, or photographs, to name a few. Table 1 illustrates the numerous and diverse types of Social Media Tools available. This list is just indicative and, by no means, complete.

Type	Examples	Description
<b>Social networking</b>	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Google Plus, Ning, Bebo	Allows users to add friends, send messages and share content. People on social networking sites group in communities of like-minded interest
<b>Social bookmarking</b>	Digg, Delicious, Yahoo! Buzz, StumbleUpon, Reddit,	Allows users to share their favorite online content with one another while also creating online bookmarks.
<b>Blogs</b>	Wordpress, TypePad, Blogger, livejournal, Tumblr	Online journals where the author can write (blog) about any interest he wants. The blogger can also use the blog to share content picked up from other Social Media sites (YouTube, Issuu) by taking advantage of the simple embedded codes offered by those content hosts
<b>Micro-Blogging</b>	Twitter	Allows users to send short 140 character message in real time to large audiences
<b>Collaborative Projects/Wikis</b>	Wikipedia, Google Docs	Online content created as a result of multiple users working on the same content, but at different times, from different places

---

*Emergency Managers, and National Association of Government Communicators.* Retrieved from <http://www.boozallen.com/insights/insight-detail/42420696>

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, A. & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons, Volume 53 (1), Pages 59–68*

<sup>10</sup> Ian, T. (2007). Slide Share Presentation about Web 2.0 and You. Retrieved from <http://www.slideshare.net/thomaid/web-20-and-you>

Type	Examples	Description
<b>Photo Sharing</b>	Flickr, Photobucket, Picasa	Allows users to upload photos, share either privately with only selected other users or publicly
<b>Video/Music Sharing</b>	YouTube, Spotify,	Allows users to upload or watch video content or listen to music to a site for sharing either privately or public
<b>Presentation Sharing</b>	Slideshare.net, Scribd, Issuu	Allows users to upload files as PDF's and convert to work with the online presentation applications. The presentation tools include embedded codes and email options to share the content online
<b>Intellectual Property Sharing</b>	Creative Commons	Licensing rights and permissions for others to use the photos by simply embedding the codes in their blogs
<b>Meetups/Events</b>	Evite, Facebook events, foursquare	Allows users to promote and display where people are at that moment
<b>Questions and Answers</b>	Yahoo questions, Facebook Q & A, formspring	Allows users to ask random questions, and anyone can answer and start a conversation

**Table 1: Social Media Tools**

If we examine the recent disasters and emergencies, the most common tools used in crisis situations have been micro-blogging, social networking, blogs, photo/video sharing tools. Even the traditional mass media have embraced Social Media tools and technology for newsgathering. During a crisis, Twitter reports substantial information exchange, large amounts of conversation and mass coverage of events. Information and pictures move through Social Media sites at lightning speed. Social Media tools are used to engage customers, verify and counter allegations and be a 24/7 spot for stakeholders.

In 2008, during the Mumbai terrorist attacks, Twitter was a source for breaking the news and sending out emergency contact numbers and locations of hospitals that needed blood donations. Local Mumbai bloggers used their blog sites to get the word out and let people know what was happening. They were instrumental in consolidating lists of the dead and injured. Twitter played an important role in narrating the story during the crisis, both in India and internationally. “The attacks in India served as another case study in how technology is transforming people into potential reporters, adding a new dimension to the news media,” said Brian Stelter & Noam Cohen in their article published by the New York Times.<sup>11</sup>

### c. SOCIAL MEDIA – A STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Consumers today are increasingly mobile and, as technology advancements continue around the world, Social Media becomes one of the most important ways of reaching the audience as well as gathering news. The growing importance of Social Media in all aspects of daily communications reflects the need to employ Social Media strategies as a part of any crisis management plan.

An illuminating infographic published by the Search Engine Journal, reveals that the growth of Social Media has been dramatic in the last decade. Facebook has about 310 million unique visitors every day, which accounts for over 50% of the registered users. If Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest after China and India, almost twice the size of the USA. The infographic elucidates the impact of

<sup>11</sup> Stelter, B., & Cohen, N. (2008). Citizen Journalists Provided Glimpses of Mumbai Attacks. New York Times, November 29, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/world/asia/30twitter.html>

Social Media on the world by stating the top social networks used by countries. Seen in Table 2 below is an example of the growth of US Internet users who use social networks sites, by age, in percentage of each group.<sup>12</sup>

Time / Age	Sep 2005	May 2008	Nov 2008	April 2009	Dec 2009	May 2010
18-29 yrs	16%	67%	73%	76%	83%	86%
30-49 yrs	12%	25%	36%	48%	58%	61%
50-64 yrs	7%	11%	16%	25%	36%	47%
65+ yrs	5%	7%	4%	13%	22%	26%

**Table 2: US Internet Users Timeline**

In a new study on the use of Social Media in Disasters and Emergencies in US, American Red Cross found that:<sup>13</sup>

- About half of the general population participates in online communities or social networks. Almost 80% of the population that participates in the online communities is connected to at least one social network, with Facebook and Twitter being the most popular
- The Internet is the third most popular way for people to gather emergency information. Television and local radio remain the front runners, with 18 percent of both the general and the online population specifically using Facebook for that purpose
- Nearly 70 per cent of people expect organizations involved in emergencies to monitor their website and Social Media platforms and respond to postings on the ongoing incident.
- People requesting assistance during emergencies now commonly use Social Media platforms. Social Media platforms are now commonly used by people requesting assistance during emergencies. Furthermore, the expectation is that authorities will heed these calls for help promptly. So, monitoring these channels is now an operational (if not lifesaving) necessity

In an attempt to examine the facets of Social Media during times of crisis, the American Public Health Association along with Booz Allen Hamilton, the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, International Association of Emergency Managers, and National Association of Government Communicators conducted a web survey. Key survey findings include: “No organization can rely on its own website as sole source of information and forum of discussions about an incident. Nor can organizations assume that they are sole or primary knowledge producers of expertise. While public has flocked to the Internet and smart phones with access to online content, the emergency community has only begun to catch up.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Henrikson, J. (2011). The Growth of Social Media: An Infographic. *Social Media Journal*, August 30, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.searchenginejournal.com/the-growth-of-social-media-an-infographic/32788/>

<sup>13</sup> American Red Cross. (2011). Social Media in Disasters and Emergencies. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/SocialMediainDisasters.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Currie, D. (2009). Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During times of Crisis: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities. *Special Report by Booz Allen Hamilton, the American Public Health Association, the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, International Association of Emergency Managers, and National Association of Government Communicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.boozallen.com/insights/insight-detail/42420696>

Social Media enables organizations to talk to their customers, allows customers to talk back to the companies, and moreover facilitates customers to talk directly to one another. In a classical emergency response model, the emergency manager or the public information officer has complete control of the information about the incident. Lea Winerman, in her article published in *Nature*, confirms that social network—users often end up bypassing the authorities – a tendency that has left officials scrambling to use this information and integrate it into traditional responses.<sup>15</sup> Social Media definitely is magnifying the impact of consumer-to-consumer conversations and, hence, the methods for shaping those conversations must be developed.

#### 4. THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

##### a. BROADCASTING

Social Media has evolved far beyond an optional form of communication. It is becoming increasingly obvious that traditional channels are no longer the only means of reaching the audience. It is the scale and reach makes broadcasting easier.

Fortunately, a wealth of new and accessible communication platforms presents the possibility of reaching more people with more relevant messages than ever before.<sup>16</sup> It sets the precedence for today's need for instant information in a crisis situation, as it inherently provokes transparency in communication in near real time to be disseminated to stakeholders. It prompts discussion, debate and feedback from those involved in the crisis as responders, victims and organizational leaders, be they politicians or owners.<sup>17</sup>

During the 2007 California Wildfires, Leysia Palen, Computer Scientist, University of Colorado, surveyed and interviewed area residents on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the fires. Many complained that the national news channels were completely worthless as they ignored everything except the comparatively minor Malibu fire that burned near celebrity homes. Further, this survey reported that official government communications, although sometimes useful, could not be relied upon. Many residents turned to websites run by local media, such as San Diego Union-Tribune; or the National Public Radio KPBS or to blogs run by individuals based in San Diego, consisting of updates from local residents with an internet connection and information to share.<sup>18</sup>

Another important phenomenon has been the growing reliance on mobile communications technology. The rapid growth of mobile applications only increases the potential for reaching a large audience in a very short period of time. Mary Meeker, Partner at Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byers (KPCB), the world's leading venture capital firm, in her presentation at the Web 2.0 summit on October 18, 2011 in

---

<sup>15</sup> Winerman, L. (2009). Crisis Communication. *New Feature Nature*, 22 January 2009, Volume 457

<sup>16</sup> Currie, D. (2009). Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During times of Crisis: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities. *Special Report by Booz Allen Hamilton, the American Public Health Association, the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, International Association of Emergency Managers, and National Association of Government Communicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.boozallen.com/insights/insight-detail/42420696>

<sup>17</sup> Prentice, S., & Huffman, E. (2008). Social Media's New Role in Emergency Management. Idaho National Laboratories. Retrieved from <http://www.inl.gov/technicalpublications/Documents/3931947.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Winerman, L. (2009). Crisis Communication. *New Feature Nature*, 22 January 2009, Volume 457

San Francisco, substantiated this by listing empowerment of people via connected mobile devices as the mega trend of the 21st Century.<sup>19</sup>

In 2008, Maine's Emergency Management Agency wondered how to get emergency information to people who are shunning traditional radio and TV in favor of the Internet. In their press release MEMA Director Rob McAleer said "Everybody is recognizing that to reach certain portions of the population, we've got to do things differently than we are, because that's the way they communicate." He confirmed that there are a lot of people who will not be reached through just traditional media. And the agency is looking at communicating messages through Twitter, texting to cell phones and other ways, to ensure that everyone in Maine is notified in the event of an emergency.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, many Social Media platforms, whether officially or not, are news distributors if not gatherers. Social bookmarking sites like, Digg, Delicious, Yahoo! Buzz, StumbleUpon, Reddit, allow users to share online content with one another. Millions of their users armed with mobile devices that can record videos, pictures and sound, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have become as important for sharing information.

#### b. GLOBAL PRESENCE WITH A LOCAL FLAVOR

Aristotle said, "Man by nature is a social animal."<sup>21</sup> An extension of the quote that is widely used is that people by nature are social beings, and they naturally form networks based on trust and similar interests. Social Media has just jazzed up these natural tendencies. Social Media connects people online, uses interactive content and platforms that build online communities, creates and connects groups through online Social Media. The main use of Social Media sites is interaction and communicating with others. People use them to keep up to date and in touch with existing friends and relations, or to create new relationships, create a community, and so on.

Social Media is ubiquitous and professes to support collaboration. It encourages globalization, interaction, participation and usability as it offers the ability to access information and to communicate with others at any time and in any place and regardless of the physical location of other people.

In her post, Lecky Thompson explains, "This has recently come to light in the number of people in the armed forces *using* YouTube, Facebook *and* Twitter *to stay* in touch. Social networking sites can bring people together with varying backgrounds who might otherwise never have met, and then encourage them to extend that experience into real world social functions."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Carlson, N. (2011). Mary Meeker's Latest Awesome Web 2.0 Presentation About The State Of The Web Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/mary-meekers-latest-awesome-web-20-presentation-about-the-state-of-the-web-2011-10>

<sup>20</sup> MEMA Turning to Social Media to Deliver Emergency Messages. (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.mpbn.net/News/MaineHeadlineNews/tabid/968/ctl/ViewItem/mid/3479/ItemId/13786/Default.aspx>

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle Quote. Retrieved from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show/183896>

<sup>22</sup> Lecky-Thompson, G. (2009). Facebook: Good or Bad for Communication. Retrieved from <http://guy-lecky-thompson.suite101.com/facebook-good-or-bad-for-communication-a121387>

Nowadays, during crises and emergencies, people have the ability (and certainly feel the need) to share what they are experiencing or thinking about an incident or share what they know about what is happening.

After a devastating earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 hit the nation of Haiti (on Jan. 12, 2010), killing hundreds and affecting thousands more, Social Media became the medium in which many communicated. Twitter users around the globe started re-tweeting to spread the word. Dramatic Haiti earthquake pictures swept across the web, bloggers began posting with YouTube videos and links for donation. The most impressive part of Social Media's impact on Haiti was the American Red Cross text message campaign that raised more than \$8 million for Haiti victim relief.<sup>23</sup>

### c. MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

Social Media for business is a 24/7, non-invasive communication tool. People use their smartphones just about anywhere - most professionals will wait all of ten seconds at a grocery store queue, bank lineup or on the subway platform before pulling out their device. According to GigaOM blogger Robert Young, “New media shifts the balance of control for production and distribution of content between corporations and consumers.”<sup>24</sup>

Businesses also are focusing on the ability to market and advertise through Social Media. Customers increasingly demand to be treated as individuals—and will give their business to suppliers that provide either unique experiences or superior value. Social Media provides the information companies can use to segment customer groups more finely than in the past, along with the tools to tailor products, services and communication campaigns to suit the needs and expectations of these individual segments. Further, Social Media creates the opportunity for much greater collaboration between departments, engendering more experimentation, faster decision making and more precisely tuned responses.<sup>25</sup>

Even the advertising may be a plus, because with Social Media, companies are better able to target, monitor and engage the particular interests of the users/customers. Professor Bill Pinkovitz of the UW-Extension explains this further. “When people create personal profiles on a Social Media site like Facebook, the information they provide is collected, stored and used to help advertisers target their online ads. For example, to join Facebook, users are required to provide a name, a valid e-mail address, gender and birth date. While advertisers do not have access to individuals’ profile information, they can obtain and use aggregate demographic data about users to reach specific audiences.”<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, J. (2010). Twitter and Facebook users respond to Haiti crisis. BBC News, January 15, 2010. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8460791.stm>

<sup>24</sup> Young, R.(2006). The Future of Social Networks – Communication. Retrieved from <http://gigaom.com/2006/10/09/the-future-of-social-networks-communication/>

<sup>25</sup> Firstbrook, C., & Wollan, R.(2011). Harnessing the power of Social Media. Retrieved from <http://www.accenture.com/us-en/outlook/pages/outlook-journal-2011-harnessing-power-social-media.aspx>

<sup>26</sup> Pinkovitz, B. Social Media networks provide for targeted advertising. *Economic Snapshot - Weekly Publication of the UW-Extension School*. Retrieved from [http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/economies/economicnapshot/documents/week4\\_001.pdf](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/economies/economicnapshot/documents/week4_001.pdf)

While the economic conditions have left many marketers struggling to do more with less, Social Media is the gift that keeps on giving. Not only does a social medium help marketers amplify their marketing efforts and increase marketing success, but, if leveraged properly, it can be a true differentiator - enabling better planning, increased visibility/reach, greater selling efficiency, and improved customer satisfaction through real-time interactions.<sup>27</sup>

In times of crisis, Social Media also provides the opportunity for people to participate and contribute their ideas, experience and knowledge. They participate personally in Social Media because they value and identify with the purpose. The massive earthquake that rocked Japan in March 2011 is a good example to demonstrate how individuals, groups, and tech giants mobilized their existing Social Media resources. Social Media not only guided first responders and victims, but also served as a forum to express the concern and debate over the issue of nuclear power in an earthquake-prone country like Japan. “Global voices, an international community of volunteer bloggers, offered links, resources, and translations in multiple languages for users, within minutes after the earthquake struck. Japanese citizens used social networks to exchange information and reach out to their family and friends. Voice services were disrupted but people were able to text and use data services.”<sup>28</sup> Social networks like Twitter and Facebook also came to the rescue. They posted an information guide offering tips and other resources in Japanese and English. Google introduced People Finder, within minutes after the earthquake to help the victims find their family and friends. Social networks demonstrated their social responsibility by adopting these measures to help and guide the victims of the earthquake in Japan.

#### d. POLITICS

According to Clay Shirky, Professor of New Media at New York University, “Social Media have become a fact of life for the civil society worldwide, involving regular citizens, activists, governments, non-profit organizations, nongovernmental organizations, private firms, software providers and the likes.”<sup>29</sup>

Egyptian Prime Minister, Ahmed Shafiq resigned on March 3, 2011, in a rather unconventional manner. The announcement was made on the Facebook page of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, military group that ruled Egypt until the new elections. This resignation was fallout from the uprising that began in Egypt in January 2011. The uprising, comprised of non-violent demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, demanded the overthrow of regime of President Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptians focused on the legal and political issues in the country and used Facebook as a tool to express their concerns. During the most critical time of protests, President Hosni Mubarak’s regime attempted several internet blackouts throughout Egypt to stop the uprising. This led to an even bigger and wider protest. Facebook was the best non-violent way to reach all the young activists in the country.

---

<sup>27</sup> Penna, M. (2011). 11 Ways to Leverage the Power of Social Media for the 2011 Holiday Season. Retrieved from <http://www.clickz.com/clickz/column/2121752/leverage-power-social-media-2011-holiday-season>

<sup>28</sup> Preston, J. (2011). After Quake and Tsunami, Japanese Citizens Flock to Social Networks for Information. New York Times, March 13, 2011. Retrieved from <http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/after-quake-and-tsunami-japanese-citizens-flock-to-social-networks-for-information/>

<sup>29</sup> Shirky, C. (2011). The Political Power of Social Media. Retrieved from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>

It is worth noting just how embedded the social network has quickly become in Egyptian politics and government. From the platform used to plan the protest that started it all to the means of announcing one of the movement's victories more than a month later, Facebook is now an integral part of Egypt's political scene.<sup>30</sup> The uprising in Egypt triggered similar protests in almost the whole Arab world. Several Arab countries joined the revolutionary wave of protests, marches and demonstrations and used Social Media to create awareness, engage in conversations, and organize events.

Another remarkable example is how Social Media led the way in coverage of violence and rioting in the lead-up to the Iranian elections in 2009. "With the Iranian government clamping down on information and enforcing censorship (during protests of the Iranian presidential election in June 2009), Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube became the primary media for bringing information out of the conflicted nation and spreading notes among dissidents. Twitter's role was so important, in fact, that the US government got involved in scheduling Twitter's downtime;" stated Ben Parr, Co-founder of Mashable.com, in his blog post.<sup>31</sup>

## 5. FOUR STAGES OF CRISIS AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Steven Fink cites the Webster dictionary definition of crisis as "turning point for the better or worse;" as a "decisive moment" or "crucial time." The definition suggests that there exist two sides to a crisis; positive and negative. A crisis is an unpredictable time or state of affairs that awaits a decision.<sup>32</sup>

Social Media is an avenue organizations must take to obtain trust. It provides a platform for the organizations to build the much-needed credibility, as they are inherently conversational and transparent. Social Media facilitate the flow of real-time information to all parties concerned, be they citizens, employees, or media. It also innately prompts conversation, feedback, knowledge, insight and experience sharing from the people who care the most about the crisis.

Steven Fink, in his book "Crisis Management - Planning for the Inevitable," presents the anatomy of the crisis and lists its four stages; namely Prodromal Stage, Acute Stage, Chronic Stage and Resolution Stage.<sup>33</sup> Social Media is relevant during all four stages of the crisis; the real-time information dissemination helps in reaching out to millions at the same time. Also, real-time availability of data, photos and videos can help first responders to conduct the hazards assessment and plan the cleanup. Additionally people even in remote locations can access information about the crisis situations or their loved ones.

Social Media presents several other advantages in combating a crisis. It allows messages to reach a global scale in a split second and hence enables mobilization of resources across the world. It heightens situational awareness and helps to tap volunteers from around the globe. As discussed earlier, Social

---

<sup>30</sup> Chick, K. (2011). The new Egypt, where the PM resigns on Facebook. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Backchannels/2011/0303/The-new-Egypt-where-the-PM-resigns-on-Facebook>

<sup>31</sup> Parr, B. (2010). Social Media's True Impact on Haiti, China, and the World. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2010/01/17/social-media-political-impact/>

<sup>32</sup> Fink, S. (2002). Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable. Amacom Books (1989).

<sup>33</sup> Fink, S. (2002). Crisis Management: Planning for the Inevitable. Amacom Books (1989).

Media powers aid agencies to appeal directly from the public, bypassing the traditional medium of communication.

“Another benefit of Social Media is that it provides a unique and efficient way for crisis communicators to defend an organization’s brand and reputation. For example, if a blog is speaking negatively about an organization or spreading false information, crisis communicators can respond by posting counter remarks or linking to other blogs and online content that sets the record straight. In this manner, crisis situations can be minimized or averted simply by participating in and monitoring the blogosphere.”<sup>34</sup> During a crisis, people are filled with anxiety, panic, hate and trust or concern, all of which will spread throughout the Internet when they seek information and answers. If an organization is actively involved with an online presence depicting concern, they can mitigate rumors and get out the facts.<sup>35</sup>

Social Media also can be effectively used to mitigate the impact and/or response to a crisis by broadcasts on YouTube, Facebook or Twitter. They also can be used to send guidelines and information in the Acute/Chronic Crisis Stages or the Response and Recovery stages. The American Red Cross extensively used Social Media channels to spread the word during the H1N1 outbreak, Hurricane Ike and Gustav and all other natural disasters that occurred in the last couple of years. Social Media platforms through blogs, Video logs, Tweets and YouTube can be leveraged to prepare citizens and employees, as well as first responders, for the Acute Crisis Stage.

The reality of crises today is that they erupt with unprecedented speed, with an insatiable thirst for news. The advantage of the porous boundaries between social and mainstream media is that they provide the flexibility of nearly anyone to break news. However today, Social Media is enthusiastically engaged in combatting crises. Social Media aids two-way communication, thereby building goodwill and credibility. It gives a human voice to the situation at hand and accommodates public’s emotional response. It also produces a record of all that has happened with a date, time and venue.

Social Media can serve as an excellent platform to create partnerships for sharing best practices, methods and messages for crises. FEMA is looking at reaching out to the private sector to collaborate and counter crises, said Nick Russo, Assistant Director-FCO Operations at Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), at a Disaster Management Symposium in Paxton, Massachusetts, October, 2011. The end goal is to inform the public of what is happening and to persuade them to take necessary steps to improve their safety. The worst thing in a crisis is to not know information. Social Media meritoriously fills the vacuum.

Sustaining the use of Social Media as a news gathering and distribution tool is a community mind-set in which the spirit of giving is important. This rapid form of communication motivates not only volunteers and independent citizens but also large corporations to lend a supporting hand.

---

<sup>34</sup> Prentice, S., & Huffman, E. (2008). Social Media's New Role in Emergency Management. Idaho National Laboratories. Retrieved from <http://www.inl.gov/technicalpublications/Documents/3931947.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Moore, S., & Seymour, M. (2005). Global Technology and Corporate Crisis, Strategies, Planning And Communication In The Information Age. Routledge, New York

## 6. SOCIAL MEDIA VERSUS TRADITIONAL MEDIA

The discussions and examples shared earlier in this paper, elucidates the role Social Media has played in crisis management and response in the past few years. The Table 3 below attempts to chart out the differences between Social Media and Traditional Media and presents their pros and cons.

There is no single recipe or formula for success. By no means, is Social Media or Traditional Media the ultimate solution; however, judicious use of both traditional and internet based promotional tools to engage customers/audiences will help in the long run.

<b>Social Media Communications</b>	<b>Traditional Media Communications</b>
Internet and mobile-based means of communication (social networks, blogs, etc.)	Traditional means of communication (televisions, radio, newspapers, magazines)
Engaging people/audience	Informing people/audience
Unstructured sharing of information	Structured sharing of information
Two-way communication (Dialogue)	One-way communication (Monologue)
Quick and instant information dissemination	Bound to fixed schedules, press deadlines
Talking to Consumers/Customers	Talking at Customers/Consumers
Public/Audience exercise control on the flow of information	Government/Businesses/Organizations exercise control on the flow of information
Decentralized information distribution process	Centralized information distribution process
Consumer sponsored communication	Organization sponsored communication
Fuelled by internet research, peers and friends opinions, preferences and recommendations	Fuelled by organizations' advertising/ marketing campaigns
Trustworthy and transparent	Speculates and lacks transparency
Fosters Citizen Journalism	No public involvement
Potentially dangerous as it can easily lead to rumors/gossip mongering	"Gatekeepers" prohibit irrelevant and false information
Practical, easy and inexpensive	Unpractical, complicated and expensive

**Table 3: Social Media versus Traditional Media**

## 7. ERA OF CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Citizen journalism is a term that has gained popularity in the past few years and has been made popular through examples of Social Media such as blogs, wikis, video-logs and podcasting.

### a. WHAT IS IT?

In simple words Citizen Journalism is when private individuals do what professional journalists do. According to freelance journalist Mark Glaser, "The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the

Internet to create, augment or fact-check media on their own or in collaboration with others.”<sup>36</sup> “Citizen journalism (also known as "public", "participatory", "democratic", "guerrilla" or "street journalism") is the concept of members of the public "playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information," according to the seminal 2003 report *We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information*. Authors Bowman and Willis say: "The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.”<sup>37</sup>

#### b. WHO IS DOING IT?

Citizen Journalism is practiced by “Citizens” or “General Public” without any professional experience. “They can be independent bloggers; joint initiatives from citizen journalists; and larger citizen journalism platforms such as Global Voices and Menassat.com,” describes Mandy Jenkins, Social Media Editor, Huffington Post.<sup>38</sup> Blogger Eric Dekkers presents yet another perspective, “Social Media doesn’t just make us consumers of news, it makes us part of the news. We’re no longer relying on the mainstream media to inform us. In many cases, we’re reporting it ourselves, or at the very least, spreading it beyond the traditional media’s original reach.”<sup>39</sup>

#### c. HOW DOES IT WORK?

Renowned freelance journalist and executive editor of MediaShift, Mark Glaser explains the working of citizen journalism in his blog post, “When a traditional media outlet covers a story, the editor usually assigns the story to a reporter, the reporter does the work and turns in a story that gets edited and published. But in the case of ad hoc citizen journalism, a blogger or observer might see something happening that's newsworthy and bring it to the attention of the blogosphere or the online public. As more people uncover facts and work together, the story can snowball without a guiding editor and produce interesting results -- leading to the mainstream media finally covering it and giving it wider exposure.”

Richard Sambrook, Neiman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard gives yet another example to elucidate his point – Citizen Journalism and BBC’s role in in the July 07, 2005 London bombings; “On the day of the London bombings, the BBC News' Web site used images sent to them by citizens who were affected by the attacks. On the site, people could learn how to submit their video, photographs and words for use by the BBC.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Glaser, M. (2006). Your Guide to Citizen Journalism. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/your-guide-to-citizen-journalism270.html>

<sup>37</sup> Bowman, S., & Willis, C. (2003). *We Media: How Audiences are shaping the Future of News and Information*. American Press Institute. Retrieved from [http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we\\_media.pdf](http://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Jenkins, M. (2011). Citizen Journalism Is Booming In Egypt and The Middle East, Despite Serious Risks. Huffington Post, November 04, 2011. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mandy-jenkins/citizen-journalism-in-egypt-booming\\_b\\_1076271.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mandy-jenkins/citizen-journalism-in-egypt-booming_b_1076271.html)

<sup>39</sup> Dekkers, E. (2010). Social Media Makes Us Citizen Journalists. Retrieved from <http://problogservice.com/2010/09/15/social-media-makes-us-citizen-journalists/>

<sup>40</sup> Sambrook, R. (2005). Citizen Journalism and the BBC. The Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard Report. Retrieved from <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/100542/Citizen-Journalism-and-the-BBC.aspx>

#### d. WHY IS IT SIGNIFICANT?

According to MNET blogger, Cathy Wing, “The Internet-fueled trend of consumer-created content has led to an explosion of online citizen news sites and blogs.” Mark Glaser explains this further in his blog post, “One of the main concepts behind citizen journalism is that mainstream media reporters and producers are not the exclusive center of knowledge on a subject -- the audience knows more collectively than the reporter alone. Because of the wide dispersion of so many excellent tools for capturing live events -- from tiny digital cameras to videophones -- the average citizen can now make news and distribute it globally, an act that was once the province of established journalists and media companies.”<sup>41</sup> This is important as Social Media promises to deliver interactive communications or two-way communication — which brings a fundamental change in the news-gathering and distribution — through digital technology.

Author Lea Winerman captivantly elucidates the crisis aspect of citizen journalism in her article using the example of the shootings at Virginia Tech. “Starting at 7.00 am on the morning of 16 April 2007, an undergraduate named Seung-Hui Cho had carried a pair of semi-automatic pistols through the campus of the Virginia Tech gunning down dozens of students and professors as he went. By 9.51 it was over. But the survivors, lacking any official word from the university other than the total death toll, were still in the dark about which of their friends had lived or died. So they turned to the best information source they had: the Internet — notably, the social website Facebook. Posts appeared in quick succession, indicating the names of suspected casualties. Those here have been edited for privacy reasons.” “CH, as reported by a sorority sister,” read a post on one Facebook page. “I just finished speaking with his girlfriend, and it appears JH is a fatality as well,” read another post. As the information accumulated, the participants spontaneously began to develop their own norms to ensure accuracy. Anonymous or vague posters were asked for clarification. People had to identify themselves when they put forward the name of a shooting victim, for example, and explain where they had got the information. By the time the university released the names one day later, it was old news to the online community: they had identified all thirty-two of the deceased already.”<sup>42</sup>

#### e. WHAT ARE THE DOWNSIDES?

In their research, professors Casimir C. Barczyk and Doris G. Duncan explain, “Social Media puts an interactive twist on traditional one-way media delivery methods. It is the interactive component that makes it valuable, but it can also be detrimental if proper monitoring is not applied.”<sup>43</sup> The danger of trivial and unreliable content hovers over and defeats the very purpose of citizen journalism. Gatekeepers of traditional media or professional journalists are careful to separate supportable evidence from opinion or speculation, and prohibit use of irrelevant and false information. Many citizen journalists fail to distinguish what constitutes a reliable story, free of surmise.

---

<sup>41</sup> Glaser, M. (2006). Your Guide to Citizen Journalism. Retrieved from

<http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/your-guide-to-citizen-journalism270.html>

<sup>42</sup> Winerman, L. (2009). Crisis Communication. *New Feature Nature*, 22 January 2009, Volume 457

<sup>43</sup> Barczyk, C., & Duncan, D. (2011). Social Networking Media as a Tool for Teaching Business Administration Courses. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Vol. 1 No. 17, November 2011*

## 8. SOCIAL MEDIA CHALLENGES

In crisis situations, the challenge of communicating the key messages has existed for years. Lea Winerman exemplifies this in her article by covering Thomas Drabek's experience, a disaster researcher at the University of Denver, Colorado. He surveyed evacuees after the South Platte River flooded near Denver in 1965. More than 60% of the people he spoke to told him that even after they received a warning telling them to evacuate, they tried to confirm it – checking with family and friends, talking things over, watching to see what their neighbors were doing – before taking action.<sup>44</sup>

Author Donya Curie furthers this observation by stating, “A major challenge of Social Media, however, is a lack of confidentiality and a danger of non-verified information flashing around the globe at lightning speed. A common barrier to adopting Social Media in communications strategies can be the fear that too much information too soon will create panic.”<sup>45</sup> According to the American Red Cross, “Use of publicly available data in times or a place of crisis raises issues of authenticity, privacy, veracity and ownership.”<sup>46</sup>

Social Media however requires a long-term time commitment if not a lot of investment in terms of money. Adam Stone – author of award-winning all hazards publication – validates this claim in his article. According to Stone, “The biggest investment in Social Media comes in the form of time: Setting up accounts, broadcasting updates and monitoring conversations.”<sup>47</sup> In an illuminating article author Baily Martin reveals that, “The minuses of Social Media are that all of the sharing can be dangerous, through gossip and potential abuse of the services.”<sup>48</sup>

Patrice Cloutier, Communication Strategist at PTSC-Online spells out another important challenge, “Our audience is now very fragmented and the communications channels that we use to relay our messaging are now more numerous than ever. The challenge is to articulate a plan that will optimize reach and ensure messages can be acted upon.”<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Winerman, L. (2009). Crisis Communication. *New Feature Nature*, 22 January 2009, Volume 457

<sup>45</sup> Curie, D. (2009). Expert Round Table on Social Media and Risk Communication During times of Crisis: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities. *Special Report by Booz Allen Hamilton, the American Public Health Association, the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services, International Association of Emergency Managers, and National Association of Government Communicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.boozallen.com/insights/insight-detail/42420696>

<sup>46</sup> Emergency Social Data Summit (2010). The Case for Integrating Crisis Response with Social Media. Published by American Red Cross. Retrieved from <http://emergencysocialdata.posterous.com/the-case-for-integrating-crisis-response-with>

<sup>47</sup> Stone, A. (2011). Harnessing the Power of Social Media in Times of Crisis. Retrieved from <http://www.emergencymgmt.com/training/Harnessing-Social-Media-Connect-with-Communities.html?page=2&>

<sup>48</sup> Baily, M. (2008). Is MySpace Good for Society? A Freakonomics Quorum. "Freakonomics" blog hosted by the New York Times on Feb. 15, 2008 Retrieved from <http://socialnetworking.procon.org/view.answers.php?questionID=001614>

<sup>49</sup> Cloutier, P. (2010). Project introduction: project to advance crisis and emergency communications practice. Retrieved from <http://www.ptsc-online.ca/forums/emergencymanagementtopicscrisisandemergencycommunicationspractices/projectintroductionprojectoadvancecrisisandemerge>

Social Media is about engaging people in a conversation. Conversations that are lively, ever-evolving, fun, and full of insights. However, the content, timing, and frequency of the Social Media-based conversations are not organized nor controlled. Hence, there is a need for concrete efforts to develop protocols, evaluate the accuracy of content and increase understanding about appropriate uses of user-produced content.

## 9. FRAMEWORK FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

There are a growing number of sites that aggregate frameworks for crisis communications via Social Media. They analyze and present best practices from the crises around the world. Below is a list of websites that present the stories and topics in one location.

- CRISIS NETWORK MSLGROUP <http://crisis.mslgroup.com/>
- PTSC ONLINE <http://www.ptsc-online.ca/>
- SOCIAL MEDIA EXAMINER <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/how-to-use-social-media-for-crisis-management/>
- WSJ AND OGILVY PUBLIC RELATIONS WORLDWIDE <http://www.slideshare.net/jbell99/wsj-and-ogilvy-social-media-for-crisis-management-2009>
- AMERICAN RED CROSS <http://redcrosschat.org/2011/08/24/how-do-you-use-social-media-in-emergencies/>

## 10. CONCLUSION

In times of crisis, Social Media gives the ability to communicate quickly and effectively. It definitely revolutionizes the manner in which people communicate and gather information about stories and topics that are of interest to them. The recent American Red Cross survey supports this claim and reveals that it is no longer acceptable to not have a Social Media presence for any organization or federal agency. People expect it and often to turn to it for up-to-date information about an emerging situation or incident.<sup>50</sup>

They both seek information there and provide it. Social Media provides the right platform for people to participate and contribute their ideas, experience and knowledge. They participate personally because they identify with the purpose. In any crisis situation, people can maintain a constant connection with existing friends and family who might live in different countries, or they can form new relationships with other nationalities, regardless of 'real time' or separate locations. With the right tools in place, there's no doubt Social Media can play an important role in crisis communication.

---

<sup>50</sup> American Red Cross. (2011). Social Media in Disasters and Emergencies. Retrieved from <http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/SocialMediainDisasters.pdf>

## 11. ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Gitanjali Laad, MBA** is a Graduate Student at Clark University, MA, USA where she is pursuing an MSPC (Master of Science in Professional Communication) degree. She is also a Marketing and Communications Professional with 5 years of work experience in India, North America and Europe. Her previous experience has involved working in the Branding, Marketing and Communications team of large multinational corporations in India like: Tata Consultancy Services, Fullerton India Credit Co. Ltd., Siemens Limited.

Contact information: LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/gitanjalilaad>  
Email: [gitanjali.laad@gmail.com](mailto:gitanjali.laad@gmail.com)



**Gerald Lewis, Ph.D.**, an international consultant and trainer, works with government agencies, healthcare facilities, educational institutions and private businesses on a wide range of work, behavioral health and organizational issues. His focus is facilitating organizational recovery and resiliency with the emphasis on “people-recovery.”

He has authored numerous articles and three books: Critical Incident Stress and Trauma in the Workplace (1994), Workplace Hostility: Myth & Reality (co-author, 1998) and Organizational Crisis Management: The Human Factor (2006). He contributed the chapter, "Violence at Work: Causes and Protection" in Psychopathology in the Workplace: Recognition and Adaptation, (2004).

He is Adjunct Faculty at Boston University and Clark University teaching a variety of undergraduate and graduate courses. Through Clark, he has taught in Israel and Poland.

Contact information: Web: [www.geraldlewis.com](http://www.geraldlewis.com)  
Email: [glewis@geraldlewis.com](mailto:glewis@geraldlewis.com)