

Chapter 58

E–Solidarity and Exchange: The Role of Social Media in Public Mexican Response to Hurricane Patricia in 2015

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ABSTRACT

Between October 24 and 25 in 2015, Mexico faced the strongest hurricane ever registered in the Western Hemisphere, which reached a record of 200 mph (325 km/h) of maximum sustained winds. In spite of pessimist predictions about the final outcome of this natural disaster, at the end, it degraded itself into a tropical storm when landing in the Mexican state of Jalisco. The present research stands in a data collecting process from social media during two moments: a) throughout the happening and b) after the incident. It collected not only information and comments generated in federal and local governmental public profiles but in civil organizations and private user profiles as well. This paper describes how social media helped not only to socialize public information in order to prevent danger but it also served as a link between governmental dependencies and civil society to support affected communities after the event.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, Latin America has suffered several natural disasters along its history: From huge hurricanes like Adrian in El Salvador, the terrible earthquake in Mexico City in the year of 1985, in Haiti in 2010 and floods, fires and so on. Though, as recent researches have shown, vulnerability and mortality caused by these events are related not only with their magnitude and power but with inequality and insufficient resources in the countries that they occurred in (Rubin & Rossing, 2012, p. 19). So when natural disasters appear, infrastructure damages and casualties arise due to the lack of social and economic background and the absence of efficient risk prevention agendas. Dismissing these deficiencies is not an easy task because it depends on investment and in the application of well-design policies. However, as we will

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recognize along this paper, the use of social media could make a big difference when dealing with these kinds of contingencies, especially when the government tries to allocate important information that could help prevent risk and decrease material losses and fatalities. Experiences associated with social media and natural disasters have shown that timely information could play an important role in diminishing the destructive impact of these natural disasters. In fact, between 2005 and 2015 there has been several cases where social media has served as an important tool for emergency management: From Hurricane Katrina in 2005 to Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and from the Haiti Earthquake in 2010 to the Japan Tsunami in 2011. In those cases, national and local governments have disseminated information for warning people about possible risks and dangers and citizens have also made use of social platforms not only to communicate their current status to their relatives and friends but to update natural disaster statuses and publishing information that has helped many others to avoid important hazards (Luna & Pennock, 2015), sometimes first-hand information used by government and media enterprise comes not from professional journalists but from common people on the ground. Occasionally, the use of social media for spreading public information especially data related with hazardous and perilous difficulties, could be risky because some false and wrong information could be shared besides the worthy one. This problem decreases the quality and credibility of social media data, and in many cases, these fraudulent news produce misunderstandings and false alarms. That is why using social media in natural disasters emergencies is an important action that must be taken seriously and with responsibility by the government, citizens and organizations because false, wrong and disproportionate information about the event could be as harmful as the natural adversity itself.

As literature has established, natural catastrophes in Mexico are not a simple indication of social and economic underdevelopment, but a phenomenon that is exacerbated due to some unanswered development problems like inappropriate settlement patterns, lack of efficient urban planning and overexploitation of natural resources (García-Acosta, 2007, p. 143). Usually, when a hurricane smashes Mexican shores the potential risks increase due to a very bad hazard prevention policy. Along the years, Mexican government performance concerning disaster reduction has been insufficient. In this case, one important unresolved task is related with the lack of proposals for reducing disaster risks in regional and local governments (Saldana-Zorrilla, 2015, p. 242). In addition, almost a quarter of Mexican territory is susceptible to tropical cyclones and the country suffers around of 500 floods every year, for that reason at least the 0.4% of the federal budget is used for disaster planning (The Economist, 2015a).

As a general fact, governmental agencies and citizens in Mexico are not well prepared to struggle with these kinds of events. One of the most reoccurring problems at this point is the existence of inefficient information distribution channels. This is not just because the perennial problem of territorial accessibility in some communities but because official information does not arrive on time to the people that require it. However, since the increasing penetration at all levels of social media, 9 of 10 Internet users consult information on social platforms (Asociación Mexicana de Internet, 2015), this situation has changed. This paper aims to show how social media usage during the Hurricane Patricia event in the Mexican Pacific shore served as a very efficient way for creating and distributing information between the government and citizens, and how this information stream created social interchange and solidarity that helped not only to prevent major damages but to facilitate disaster relief after the incident. But as final outcomes will show, preventing the circulation of wrong, false and disproportionate information is mandatory for increasing the impact of social media data related with natural disasters. This however, is not just a government pending task but a goal, being responsible with the information is an assignment that belongs to all society.

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