The Transformative Power of Social Media on Emergency and Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT

There is a wind of transformation blowing across the world today. It is changing the face of emergency management and every field of human endeavor. It is called “social media”. These days, social media is redefining crisis preparedness through the increasing participation of the masses in the creation and distribution of content in ways that surpass the capacity of the mass media and public authorities. Public-generated content has been found to be useful in all phases of preparedness. Unfortunately, most public safety authorities are still suspicious of using social media in engaging and disseminating information. This article examines this new area of transformation that is having significant consequences on public safety and public life. As the scenario unfolds, emergency managers have a tough time choosing between the mass media and social media. Metaphorically, it is a race between a ‘hippo’ (mass media) and cheetah (social media).

Keywords: Collective Intelligence, Communication, Crisis Informatics, Disaster Studies, Emergency Management, Notification, Social Media, Web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

When I watch the stagnation, hesitation and frustration of emergency and public safety authorities in embracing the new wind of change, I am reminded of some battles I once observed growing up in Africa. It was a battle between the forces of transformation and the forces of stagnation.

In the 1970s, everyone in my village used to fetch water in large and rounded gourds, popularly known out there as calabashes. In the 1980s, plastic containers became commonplace. Most villagers resisted changing to the new plastic containers blaming it on the fact that the new containers smelled of lubricants. Notwithstanding the facts that the gourds were easily broken accidentally, the villagers resisted the use of plastic containers. For some reason they were not impressed by the fact that the plastic containers were stronger and sturdier.

In the 1990s, pipe-borne water arrived. More progressive villages invested in pipe-borne water projects to enable everyone to have water in their homes. My beleaguered village and a couple of other conservative-thinking villages once again opposed and resisted the adoption of pipe-borne water in the homes. Their

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refusal to adopt the pipe-borne water projects reminded me of their hesitation to adopt the plastic containers.

For many years, they lived in denial of the effectiveness of pipe-borne water, totally ignoring the health risk of doing otherwise. They insisted that they did not want to see water pipes running through their homes. They also argued that there was no way tiny pipes could carry more water than the big sturdy plastic containers; which they had managed to adopt after so many years.

Today, when emergency managers and public safety authorities oppose the adoption of the social media, I am reminded of the old water battles in my village. I am also reminded that human beings will resist change, regardless of the facts. Every generation has some “water battles” to confront. Whether public safety authorities will eventually adopt social media, it remains to be seen. One thing is clear, social media battle is akin to the pipe versus plastic battles.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the arrival of the Internet in the early 1990s, the mass media was the main source of information in the public sphere. From its inception, the mass media—print, radio and television (Benkler, 2006), has gone through varying degrees of independence. Historically, it has been controlled by the state in some countries, while in others it has been owned and operated by independent owners who depended heavily on advertising for revenue. As such, the mass media has never been completely independent of prevailing socio-economic and political forces.

When the Internet arrived, it was a milestone in the public communication arena because it launched a new era of democratization of information. This was possible because its ownership and operation was no longer in the control of state or big media organizations. It was owned and controlled by individual citizens. This constituted a major shift because the emergence of Internet was a reversal in the way information is generated, distributed and consumed in society at large. Since the arrival of the Internet, the mass media’s overwhelming influence on communication has thus been waning in numbers, power and following, thanks to the increasing adoption of Internet-based online forms of communication by the general public.

In the area of emergency and crisis communication, the Internet has also been eroding the mass media’s clout of influence. Over the years, mass media has been losing a significant part of its audience to social media networks or the Internet’s ‘de facto twin-brother.’ Online social networks often engage in social production of information. It is thanks to the existence of these social networks that social media has emerged as a platform for collaboration amongst individuals that are organized outside of market and managerial hierarchies (Benkler, 2006).

It is the battle between the mass media and social media (i.e., who creates, mediates and arbitrates the public conversation) that is creating transformational issues for emergency management and public safety authorities today. For many decades, public safety authorities relied upon a public conversation that is mediated by the mass media. The origin of mass media can be traced back to the bourgeois era (Habermas, 1992). With the emergence of social production and social media, public safety authorities are torn between the old and the new media.

Thus, the change in the way the society communicates information is at the root of the transformations that are beginning to happen in emergency management today. In this transition era, emergency managers and public safety authorities are victims of a battle that was neither initiated nor promoted by them. They are simply caught in a crossfire that is not of their making and they were totally unprepared to deal with the push from both sides.

When we change the way we communicate, we change society (Shirkey, 2008). Today, we
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