

Social Media and Emergency Services? Interview Study on Current and Potential Use in 7 European Countries

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ABSTRACT

Social media is much just used for private as well as business purposes, obviously, also during emergencies. Emergency services are often confronted with the amount of information from social media and might consider using them – or not using them. This article highlights the perception of emergency services on social media during emergencies. Within their European research project EMERGENT, the authors therefore conducted an interview study with emergency service staff (N=11) from seven European countries and eight different cities. Their results highlight the current and potential use of social media, the emergency service's participation in research on social media as well as current challenges, benefits and future plans.

Keywords: Emergency Services, EMERGENT, Europe, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION AND RELATED WORK

The need of emergency services to employ with social media has risen during the last years, as long as these kinds of media are used more and more – of course also during emergencies. Social media is thereby defined as a “group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

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1.1. Previous Cases

Since now, the majority of research focuses on crises and emergencies in the USA and deals with Twitter (Reuter et al., 2012). Table 1 summarizes the literature in a structured way by providing an overview of studies with regard to their reference, the related case or scenario, a brief overview of the scientific contribution and a keyword. The cases are sorted by the year the event took place. They have been identified while searching in Google scholar for the keywords “social media”, “emergency”, “disaster”, “crisis”. However, due to the amount of studies, only the most project-related have been selected to provide an appropriate overview.

1.2. Previous Surveys with Citizens

Beside the several studies about the use of social media with regard to emergencies, just a few surveys on the perception of social media exist: With over 1,000 participants, a comparative study of the Canadian Red Cross (2012) aimed to figure out to what extent Canadian citizens use social media and mobile devices in crisis communication and what they expect from the emergency services both, currently and in the future. The American Red Cross (2012b) also studied citizens’ use of social media during emergencies, with 1,017 online and 1,018 telephone survey respondents. However, these surveys only focus on citizens and not on professional emergency services.

1.3. Previous Surveys with Emergency Services

Another comparative study published by the American National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) contains the results of a survey conducted in 2012 among members of emergency services from 50 Federal States of the US (San et al., 2013). The survey, which involved 505 respondents, focused on the current degree of use of social media in crisis situations by emergency services and the future development of the organizations in respect of possible use. Additional questions were asked regarding general opinions of social media and the trustworthiness of citizen-generated information. Although the respondents indicated a positive attitude towards social media in general and valued its suitability for information dissemination, 75% mentioned the requirement of verifying citizen-generated content, and otherwise questioned its credibility. However, the main barrier identified, was the lack of personnel, experience and knowledge to take on additional responsibilities. However, they argued that the “largely untapped resource” of digital volunteers could “help to alleviate some personnel issues”. The study revealed that 85% of US authorities already use social media.

A further survey of 241 US emergency managers at the county level in 2014 shows that only about half of these agencies use social media (Plotnick et al., 2015). Most of them do not have any formal policies to guide their use. Of those that do have formal policies, about one quarter actually forbid the use of social media. As main barriers for communication from authorities to citizens a lack of staff, guidance and skills have been identified; main barriers for the other way around (from citizens to authorities) are staff, trustworthiness and information overload. The authors conclude that “the agencies and their representatives are not yet ready to embrace social media and use it to its fullest potential. For the most part, current social media use is for dissemination of information, not the collection of it”. Furthermore “in addition to technological advances, policy and management changes are needed as well, to remove the “red tape” (lack of guidelines or even prohibitions against use) that impedes the effective use” of social media (Plotnick et al., 2015).

Flizikowski et al. (2014) present a survey within Europe, conducted among citizens (317 respondents) and emergency services (130 respondents plus 33 interviews from Finland, France,

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