Tweeting up for humanitarian emergencies

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Abstract

Twitter came into existence in March 2006 and thus begun the onslaught of social media which slowly percolated into the minds and hearts of citizens around the world. Twitter has been inconsistent in verifying legitimate accounts inspite of requests which add to confusion. There are perception problems that twitter and other social media problems suffer from that journalists and politicians are somehow more authentic than rest of the world and are more responsible than others. Reforms in this regard remain necessary and important. Social media dramatically alters the emergency communication by making the information flow in multiple directions. Through social media and web pages a wide range of relevant information can be made available to the public. Such emergency information will help those who are under prepared for an incidence. Life-saving directives at the beginning or during the incident would save many. India's disaster risk reduction system need to go a long way and many states in India can comprehend little about the risk and rewards involved. On the same note, channelizing DRR in social media and tweeting it up, needs regulation and responsibility too.

Keywords: Twitter, Humanitarian, India, Social Media

Introduction

Twitter came into existence in March 2006 and thus begun the onslaught of social media which slowly percolated into the minds and hearts of citizens around the world. In the year 2013, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) came out with a National Preparedness Report following Hurricane Sandy which mentioned that twitter users sent over 20 million Sandy related twitter posts despite the loss of cell phone service during the peak of Hurricane Sandy. (FEMA 2013).

With this effort, the sector of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) began to witness the incoming tide of social media as a tool to address and enhance disaster response and relief work while on ground. Besides twitter, Facebook also supports many emergency related organisations, including Information System for Crisis Response and Management (ISCRAM) and The Humanitarian Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) Project. (Lindsay 2011).

The American Red Cross had commissioned a study in 2009 to understand the involvement of social media in DRR. They observed that social media sites are the fourth most popular source where civilians obtained emergency information (American Red Cross 2009). The digital age continues to optimise the usage of social media as a networking platform and also to share information which is often necessary and sometimes un-necessary among friends, families and professional spheres of life.

Social Media and legitimizing Information

Social media has now proven to play a major role in the disaster response system. For instance, mere sharing of images, texting and tweeting makes the public a part of the response network. (Liu SB 2008). But the problem of wrong information looms large which can have devastating real world consequences. Every wrong retweet can expose it to larger populations which can spread panic during emergencies and give rise to another emergency in itself. Twitter has been inconsistent in verifying legitimate accounts inspite of requests which add to confusion. There are perception problems that twitter and other social media problems suffer from that journalists and politicians are somehow more authentic than rest of the world and are more responsible than others. Reforms in this regard remain necessary and important. Every communication made during a disaster must be carefully confirmed, because cellular networks may be overwhelmed and communication lines in many areas may simply collapse. Some natural disasters which are severe in nature can lead to the entire grid of communication to black out and keeping the community in darkness and anxiety as well (Stiegler et al 2011).

Unwelcomed untrained disaster volunteers and videographers and photographers must be discouraged from reaching the disaster site, because they do little good and

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do not do a background check before spreading the information they wish to produce to their respective networking circles. Social media dramatically alters the emergency communication by making the information flow in multiple directions. Through social media and web pages a wide range of relevant information can be made available to the public. Such emergency information will help those who are under prepared for an incidence. Life-saving directives at the beginning or during the incident would save many. The growing utility and the ubiquitous nature of social media communications is destined to change the way professionals in DRR work, but the question is whether this can be extrapolated to a wider audience.

Mainstreaming social media for "cooperative resilience in DRR"

Co-operative resilience in DRR can be viewed as a concept and consciousness which empowers DRR professionals and communities to act responsibly while managing the situation and can also be extended to social media as well. Humans are naturally information seekers who are much dependant on their own social networks. (Palen & Liu 2007). Post disaster situations forces people to look for alternative means of information if they get unsuccessful from their familiar sources. (Stiegler2011) This is where tweets become sensitive and responsible. Evidence points out that, civilians will seek information from any available venue including mass media modes like newspaper, television and internet. (Boyle *et al* 2004; Stiegler *et al* 2011 ; Hughes *et al*., 2008).

What it means to India

Disaster situations in India overwhelm social media communications particularly due to the volume game and the magnitude in terms of population circles. Everyone seems to care during a disaster and intentions are very honest and truthful, not necessary useful. Capacity building initiatives with regard to addressing usage of social media during disasters needs to be stepped up. Training programmes for government officials and non government officials need to be organised in a phased manner and twitter verification teams need to be enlightened as well. National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) which is the nodal agency for disaster management in India should come up with a guideline for social media usage during disasters and what are the roles, different stakeholders could possibly do to streamline and legitimize information channels. Having said that, the District Disaster Management Authority and State Disaster Management Authority must then recruit volunteers, trained professionals and have a data base of effective communicators to spread the word in an organised manner after due deliberations with the Incident Command Systems.

India's disaster risk reduction system need to go a long way and many states in India can comprehend little about the risk and rewards involved. On the same note,

channelizing DRR in social media and tweeting it up, needs regulation and responsibility too.

Competing Interests

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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