Editorial: Social Media and Citizen Engagement in Crises

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In his ‘Agility and Discipline: Critical Success Factors for Disaster Response’, John R. Harrald (2006: 256) argued that “designers of organizational systems for emergency response, like designers of software systems, must ensure both discipline (structure, doctrine, and process) and agility (creativity, improvisation, and adaptability)”. According to him, the conventional wisdom that there is a trade-off between command requirements for managing a large organization and the need to ensure a broad participation and coordination among multiplicity of stakeholders is based on a false assumption. As such, he argues, effective preparation for and response to emergencies require approaches that achieve both discipline and agility.

Recently, the widespread adoption of new media technologies and social media applications brought to fore new questions about how the gap between organizational structures that prioritize centralized decision making and approaches that can foster creativity and flexibility in crisis management can be bridged. A growing number of studies indicate that a key dimension of such questions concerns the role that citizens may play in emergency communications and crisis management (e.g., Baruh and Watson 2014; Murthy 2013; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012; Starbird and Palen 2010; Taylor et al. 2012)

First, researchers suggest that increased utilization of social media by the members of the public can potentially enhance information gathering and problem solving capabilities of response organizations and public authorities (Starbird and Palen 2010; Wegscheider et al. 2013). Commenting on this potential benefit of social media for emergency response efforts, Justin Herman, the social media lead officer for the U.S. Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies at the General Services Administration, opined that during an emergency ‘social media offer that unique ability in order to engage and listen in real time to the needs of the citizens’ (Herman, quoted in O’Connell 2012). This ability to “listen to” and engage with citizens during an emergency, and the ensuing intelligence, may play a critical
role in determining the priority areas for first response, efficiently directing response stations and volunteers to the places of need, and coordinating the response actions of volunteers and response organizations (Corbin 2012; Harmancı and Kader 2013).

Second, new media technologies and social media bring about new means through which citizens can record, produce, share and get access to information. Types of information that are now much more readily available include information produced by fellow citizens and information shared by various response organizations using social media platforms (Steff 2013). In this respect, commentators have frequently noted that the growth of social media platforms means that individuals should no longer be considered as mere consumers of information but also their producers, verifiers and curators. Indeed, literature on citizen journalism suggests that the increased role that citizens play in production and dissemination of information create new opportunities, such as disintermediation of information (Papadopoulos 2013; Waldman 2011).

Third, particularly in political crises, the increased availability of new media technologies that allow networking of individuals offers new possibilities for citizens to organize, engage and coordinate action as activists. With the help of online networks, activists can locally and globally push grassroots ideas, organize and coordinate action (such as during the Occupy movements), and get their voices heard by the wider public (Castells 2012; Juris 2005). Arguably, such use of social network technologies have the potential to transform the organizational structures of activist networks in ways that may have long term implications for the future of political organizations and participatory politics. In addition, recent emergencies have illustrated how activist movements may utilize social media to form loose networks that may help response efforts in other emergencies. This was the case for the Occupy movement, which reportedly was faster to organize its loose network (i.e., Occupy
Sandy) and deliver first response before response teams of larger organizations were mobilized sufficiently to assist areas impacted by Hurricane Sandy (Helsloot et al. 2015).

At the same time, the increased utilization of social media by citizens during emergencies and crises brings about new challenges for emergency management and citizen security as well as raising key questions related to ethical considerations.

Consider, for example, the increasingly common use of mobile technologies and social media for recording and dissemination of photographs or video footage during an emergency. On the one hand, such recording of incidents may serve an important function in terms of documenting and disseminating real time information and even uncovering misconduct—as was the case during the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, when, reportedly, the video footage of police officers beating protestors was one of the main reasons why the protests grew (Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology 2013). Yet, as recent research has outlined, recording and dissemination of information and footage may also have crucial ethical and public safety implications.

First, a significant threat to the security of citizens concerns how, during the act of recording, an individual may put himself/herself in physical danger. Relatedly, there is increasing evidence suggesting how citizens may impede emergency response procedure while rushing to capture and/or share the next “newsworthy” information. For instance, following the 2007 Glasgow airport attacks, Pamela Welsh (2007) of The Guardian was highly critical of how the desire to record the incidents overrode other civic responsibilities that citizens have at a moment of crisis:

When the burning car careened into Glasgow's terminal one building and the police were attempting to arrest the suspects, these “citizens” did not go and help the authorities… Surely, the whole point of being a good citizen is to help
others, to actively participate in public service, volunteering and working to make life better for all. Why did the owners of the mobile phones that captured the burning car on film not step in? … At the very least, they should have ushered their fellow citizens and on-lookers to safety, not stood there filming such a traumatic event.

This was also clearly the case in the Mumbai shooting and bombing attacks (2008) carried out by a militant organization. Reportedly, authorities requested for Tweets relating to military and police responses to be stopped because of the concern that the publication of this type of information might be strategically “useful” to the attackers (BBC News 2008).

A second related issue raised by citizens’ use of recording devices to record and then report about incidents concerns the failure to safeguard the privacy and anonymity of individuals, whom may be recorded in the event of a crisis. Indeed, researchers have commented that even when personally identifiable information is masked, collection and analysis of weak identifiers, that is “pieces of information that can be used to identify individual users” could result in the identification of a person (Palen et al. 2010; Yates and Paquette 2011; Watson et al. 2014). For instance, in a political crisis, the sharing of personal information such as an individual’s physical location may result in their identification and their exposure to undue surveillance. This was the case during the uprisings in Iran in 2009, where officials restricted access to the web, and citizens’ social media usage was analysed to identify, locate, and target online dissidents (Joseph 2012).

Third, recent events have also illustrated that use of social media to record and share information about an incident may often result in dissemination of false information (Kuhn 2007; Watson et al. 2014) which may, among other problems, lead to mass panic (Bai 2012; Pezzo and Beckstead 2006) and vigilantism that may physically, socially, and emotionally
harm individuals or larger segments of a population. Perhaps one of the best-documented examples to the potential implications of dissemination of misinformation during a crisis is what transpired in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombings. In their analysis of Twitter content following the bombing, Starbird et al. (2014) observe that a substantial proportion of the tweets circulated rumours. One significant rumour pertained to the misidentification of Sunil Tripathi, a missing student, as one of the perpetrators. The spread of this rumour, which started when some contributors to the social media site Reddit speculated that Mr. Tripathi looked like the bombing suspects released by FBI, is indicative of how such a rumour can quickly get out of hand and threaten the wellbeing of individuals. First, it should be noted that this accusation found its way to the mass media, resulting in an amplified witch-hunt. Second, the spread of the rumours have reportedly not only obstructed his family’s efforts to find him but also subjected the family itself to comments (including racist ones) from online commentators (Bindley 2013).

With these concerns in mind, a number of scholars as well as mass media outlets have been developing rules of conduct and guidelines. For example, an edited volume entitled The Verification Handbook: A Definitive Guide to Verifying Digital Content for Emergency Coverage (Silverman 2014) contains a number of chapters that explain how journalists and members of the public can filter information and verify content. At the most basic level, this involves asking questions related to sources, provenance, date and location of the content (Wardle 2014). Likewise, CNN’s iReport (a portion of their website dedicated to presenting news created and shared by citizen journalists, thereby engaging the public in the creation and discussion of news items) indicates in its guidelines that it does not accept content that ‘advocates dangerous, illegal or predatory acts or poses a reasonable threat to personal or public safety’ (CNN 2013). Yet, the long-term effectiveness of such guidelines may often be limited because citizens, who, as Allan (2012) describes, become spontaneously involved in
recording and reporting only as ‘accidental journalists’ and thereby are unlikely to have been prepared by learning about rules of conduct. As Watson and Hagen outline in their article in this issue, such issues mean that the main challenges to emergency response are not limited to ‘typical organizational barriers and difficulties’ but rather involve questions related to how citizen engagement and partnership between stakeholders can be promoted through the cycle of emergency management (from preparation to response and recovery).

**About this issue**

In the light of the issues summarized above, this special issue aims to investigate the opportunities and challenges associated with citizens’ use of social media during/after crises and emergencies. The articles presented in this issue will focus on the various roles that citizens may assume during crises and emergencies: 1) first responders, 2) social activists, 3) citizen reporters/journalists.

![Figure 1: Citizens’ Role in Emergencies and Crises](Image)
The articles in this issue represent a selection of papers from an international workshop organized in September 2014 by The COntribution of Social Media in Crisis Management (COSMIC) Project, funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7), grant agreement no: 312737.

The COSMIC project is a support action project that aims to 1) integrate applied and theoretical research related to utilization of social media in emergency management; 2) explore new communication technologies and their applications to promote safety of citizens; 3) examine involvement of citizens in emergency response; and 4) develop guidelines—to be used by various stakeholders including response organizations, government authorities, mainstream media and individuals—for utilization of social media during crises and emergencies.

The COSMIC guidelines adopt a set of principles that are called as the AID approach, which calls for (Helsloot et al. 2015):

1) Acknowledging the fact that civil society can be trusted;

2) Increasing the ability of civil society to take responsibility for further guarding its own well-being;

3) Developing the capacities of public authorities for adapting to social media use by civil society.

The articles in this special issue will focus on questions related to the application of these principles in different types of emergencies and crises. Specifically, the articles will investigate how various stakeholders (e.g., emergency response organizations, public authorities, news institutions) do (or do not) utilize social media for engaging citizens in emergency preparedness and response, changing organizational and social dynamics and their implications for citizen mobilization, and ethical issues that arise from citizens’ use of social media during emergencies.
The first article ‘An Engaged Public: Considerations for the Use of Social Media in Managing Crises’, authored by Hayley Watson and Kim Hagen, uses findings from desk-based research conducted during the COSMIC project to outline some of the key issues that this editorial has focused on. Specifically, the article provides an overview of opportunities and challenges faced in engaging the public during different phases of crisis management (i.e., before, during, and after a crisis).

The second article ‘Crowdsourcing and the Folksonomy of Emergency Response: The Construction of a Mediated Subject’ by Gregory Asmolov utilizes activity theory to discuss the role Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) play in citizen involvement in emergency response. The article uses the notion of “folksonomy of activity” to discuss how participatory opportunities provided by ICTs, including emergency response platforms as well as social networking platforms, can help shift balance of power between users and institutional actors by letting users participate in the classification of their relationships with disasters (i.e., informing, alerting, engagement).

In the third article, entitled ‘Citizens’ Involvement in Emergency Preparedness and Response: A Comparative Analysis of Media Strategies and Online Presence in Turkey, Italy and Germany’, Salvatore Scifo and Yusuf Salman use data emanating from the COSMIC project to engage in a comparative analysis of the different communication technologies and strategies that response organizations and government authorities in Turkey, Italy and Germany utilized to engage citizens in emergency preparedness and response. They observe that while response organizations and government authorities are embracing social media, they still adopt an approach that prioritize “communicating to” rather than “communicating with” the public.

In the fourth article, entitled ‘Riding the (Seismic) Wave: The Building of a Media Discourse Following a Disaster’, Çağlar Akgüngör, who serves as the Director of the National
Center for Research on Risk and Disaster in AKUT (Search and Rescue Association) helps contextualize some of the findings from Scifo and Salman. This is accomplished through a detailed review of the history of the development of AKUT in the aftermath of the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey and a description of how the media rhetoric regarding AKUT’s activities as a volunteer movement led to difficulties associated with the socially transformative potential of the movement.

The next two articles shift focus from citizens’ engagement as first responders in emergency response to citizens’ role as reporters. In the article entitled ‘Citizen Involvement in Emergency Reporting: A Study on Witnessing and Citizen Reporting’, Haluk Mert Bal and Lemi Baruh summarize content analysis and in-depth interview data collected about citizen journalism activities during four recent emergencies or crises: Xynthia Storm, Boston Bombings, Gezi Protests, and Haiti Earthquake. The authors report that citizens’ engagement as reporters enhances the diversity of sources but question whether this diversity translates to diversity in types of frames adopted in sense-making. The authors also observe that citizen reporters often adopt a ‘publish, then filter’ approach, an approach with potential implications for information reliability.

The sixth article entitled ‘Hurricanes and Hashtags: How the Media and NGOs Treat Citizens’ Voices Online in Humanitarian Emergencies’, authored by Glenda Cooper, focuses on how NGOs and mainstream media “treat” citizen generated content in emergencies. The selection of the word “treat” is particularly apt in describing the multiplicity of issues, such as copyright, privacy norms and assumed hierarchies between the institution of journalism and “accidental journalists.” Using interviews, the article also helps outline citizen reporters’ expectations and experiences about the use of the content they produce.

In the final article of this issue, Zeynep Günel and Gökçe Karaoğlu investigate the role that ICTs (and particularly social media) play in social activist networks. The article, entitled
‘Transformation of Collective Action Space: A Study on the Relationship between Organizational Attributes and ICT Use’ entails a longitudinal study of the relationship between organizational structure and ICT use of four activist groups. In doing so, Günel and Karaoğlu observe a number of key patterns in how ICTs may influence the transformation of an activist network.

I hope that this selection of articles will make a noteworthy contribution to further our understanding of the opportunities as well as the challenges that are brought about by the use of ICTs by members of the public during (and before, after) emergencies and crises.
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