

Best Practices in Social Media Crisis Communications for State and Local Emergency Management Agencies

Jamie Biglow and Heather Marshall

with contributions by Dawn Thomas, James Baney, Zoe Dutton, John Milton, and Leola Abraham

Approved for public release. Unlimited distribution.

Abstract

Social media is an important tool for communication during a crisis; however, many state and local agencies face challenges with fully utilizing social media. In addition, agencies that are adapting their methods in response to lessons learned from real-world events have few opportunities to share these best practices with other similar agencies. To address these gaps, CNA set out to interview state and local emergency management agencies to better understand the challenges they face and collect and disseminate these best practices. To meet this goal, CNA interviewed 17 emergency management agencies from across the country about their experiences using social media for crisis communications. The findings, including best practices, challenges, and priority areas for growth, are summarized below. CNA hopes that these findings will help emergency management agencies across the country conduct their crisis communications planning more effectively and ultimately face fewer surprises when the event occurs.

Distribution

Approved for public release. Unlimited distribution.

This work was funded by CNA's Independent Research Center (IRC).

This document may contain materials protected by the Fair Use guidelines of Section 107 of the Copyright Act, for research purposes only. Any such content is copyrighted and not owned by CNA. All rights and credits go directly to content's rightful owner.

Approved by:



September 2023

Dawn Thomas, Managing Director
Center for Emergency Management and Operations
Safety and Security Division

Request additional copies of this document through inquiries@cna.org.

Executive Summary

Social media is an ever-changing means of communication that poses challenges and enormous opportunities for emergency management agencies. Social media can enable emergency management agencies to provide potentially life-saving information during an emergency or incident. Moreover, agencies can use social media to gather information during and after an incident both to identify individuals needing assistance and to develop initial assessments of the affected area. Unfortunately, many emergency management agencies are uncertain how to leverage social media best and frequently experience unexpected challenges with social media communications during crises. Therefore, greater sharing of lessons learned from past real-world incidents has the potential to benefit the emergency management field. To facilitate this exchange, CNA conducted a study of best practices in social media crisis communications from emergency management agencies at the state and local levels. This white paper summarizes challenges, potential best practices, and areas for growth from stakeholders across the country.

CNA's study methodology included a literature review and key stakeholder interviews with public information officers from state and local emergency management agencies across the country. CNA categorized the collected interview data around key problematic areas, such as addressing misinformation and disinformation, building trust and credibility with community members, coordinating messaging across agencies, and communicating nuanced information to the public. CNA has presented aggregated best practices for these problematic areas reflecting the collective advice of more than one agency and additional smaller-scope best practices recommended by only one agency.

This white paper contains many findings, and it may not be feasible (or even advisable) for emergency management organizations to implement all recommendations. However, armed with an understanding of community needs, jurisdictions can implement the recommendations that best serve their organizations and their communities.

Contents

- Introduction..... 1**
 - Methodology.....2
 - Social media today2
- Findings 4**
 - Challenges.....4
 - Best practices6
 - Additional best practices.....10
 - Priority areas for growth12
- Conclusion14**
- Appendix A: Interviewees.....15**
- Appendix B: Interview Questions16**
- References17**

Introduction

Social media offers enormous value and opportunity for participatory two-way communications for emergency managers. Individuals use social media to reach out for help during times of crisis, receive updates about ongoing emergencies, and directly engage with emergency managers and other officials. Individuals participate in the “push and pull” of information by posing questions, voicing concerns, and sharing opinions. Furthermore, there is a growing expectation for real-time updates and rapid responses from emergency managers. And although social media is just one of many risk communication tools, it continues to grow in significance, particularly among younger individuals.

Unfortunately, state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency management agencies across the country often face challenges in fully leveraging social media during crises. Common challenges include an inability to expand social media reach, difficulty coordinating with partner agencies, uncertainty over how to interact directly with citizens through social media, reliance on manual processes to scan social media for information, and lack of mechanisms for applying crowdsourced information to traditional response actions. Internally, agencies struggle with insufficient targeted guidance, workforce challenges, and a lack of information on what is possible (such as examples of innovative ways in which to leverage social media or what tools to use). As a result, agencies may experience unexpected challenges during events, which can overwhelm communications staff and damage the overall response effort. Meanwhile, agencies that have learned valuable lessons from past real-world incidents may lack opportunities to share those hard-won lessons more broadly with other agencies.

Public use of social media during disaster

Residents facing dire circumstances often use social media to request emergency assistance. One study of social media use during Hurricane Harvey found that more environmentally and socioeconomically vulnerable communities were more likely to make rescue requests on Twitter (Zou et al., 2017). A study that examined the relationship between social media activity during Superstorm Sandy and vulnerable communities within the storm’s path further supported this finding (Jamali et al., 2019).

Methodology

CNA's study methodology included a literature review and stakeholder interviews. The literature review allowed the team to understand the current state of the social media crisis communications field across multiple disciplines and helped to inform the interview questions. To conduct interviews, the CNA team contacted emergency management agencies from all 50 states; Washington, DC; and several territories and requested to speak to the agency's public information officer (PIO) or the person best able to speak to the agency's social media strategies. Ultimately, the team engaged with 17 emergency management agencies from across the United States representing a breadth of hazard profiles, both rural and urban areas, and jurisdictions of varying sizes (see Appendix A). The interviews followed a standard set of questions provided to interviewees in advance (see Appendix B). The team used a semi-structured interview approach such that the interviewer was permitted to deviate from these standard questions to ask relevant follow-up questions. The team then compiled, coded, and categorized the information to identify the challenges, best practices, and priority areas for growth, which are presented in this white paper.

Overall, this study seeks to fill gaps in crisis communications guidance for state and local emergency management agencies by identifying actionable solutions to common challenges, cataloging innovative best practices not recorded elsewhere, and offering examples and actionable recommendations. The callout boxes highlight anecdotes, more advanced uses of social media, and illustrative examples of social media use.

Social media today

As of 2019, 73 percent of adults in the United States use social media (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Among the agencies CNA interviewed for this study, the most commonly used platforms were Facebook and Twitter, currently called X.¹ Facebook is the most frequently visited social media site for Americans, with 69 percent using the platform. More than one-fifth of American adults (22 percent) use Twitter (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). The use of Twitter is currently declining, with a reported 3.9 percent decrease in users in 2023 and an expected additional 5.1 percent

Facebook safety feature

Facebook offers a "Local Alert" feature that is available only to local government, public health agency, and first responder pages. It enables them to provide safety information to everyone within a specific geographic range (Meta Business Help Center, n.d.).

¹ Although Twitter changed its name to "X," this research was conducted under its previous name, and this document will continue to refer to the platform as "Twitter."

decrease in 2024 (Clark, 2022). In addition, Twitter has lost 32 percent of its brand value² since changing to “X” and 50 percent of its advertising revenue (Counts & Levine, 2023).³ Although Twitter is currently the ninth most popular social media platform, it tends to be used by the public for real-time updates and reactions to major events, which helps to explain its enduring utility for emergency management agencies (“Top 9 Growing,” 2023). Although the 2022 Twitter purchase altered the nature of the platform and rendered some analytical functions obsolete, many organizations have already made a significant investment in Twitter, so its use to date among emergency management agencies has not significantly shifted. Among frequent Twitter and Facebook users, 55 percent and 47 percent, respectively, regularly use the platforms to view news (Walker & Matsa, 2021).

A subset of agencies interviewed also use Instagram and YouTube. Although Instagram is used solely for sharing images and videos, more than one-third (37 percent) of American adults use this platform. The platform is very popular with younger users; 75 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds use Instagram (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). YouTube, meanwhile, which is used exclusively for sharing videos, is the second most popular social media platform in the United States (“Top 9 Growing,” 2023). Although the popularity of both Instagram and YouTube has outpaced that of Twitter, agencies interviewed were near unanimous in their prioritization of Twitter over either alternative, citing the challenges and limitations of communicating with visual messaging, years of investment in growing Twitter followers, and public associations with Twitter for providing urgent and emergency updates.

² Brand value equates to the monetary value to said brand if it were to be sold.

⁴ Trends in this context refers to discussion topics, memes, short-form videos, and challenges that temporarily capture the attention of a wide audience and can quickly spread across major social media platforms. For example, a particular song or audio clip played over video content may add additional layers of meaning to the video.

Findings

This section provides an overview of CNA's synthesis and categorization of the interview data, including challenges, best practices, and priority areas for growth. Because of the wide variation in community profiles among the interviewees, not all findings equally apply to every situation or emergency management agency. What is valid for one community is not necessarily useful for another. CNA has chosen an inclusive approach to the findings rather than being selective about which challenges, best practices, and priority areas for growth to present.

Challenges

State and local emergency management agencies face many challenges in using social media for crisis communications. Some agencies were able to offer potential solutions or mitigations for identified challenges; however, many had no easy fix. CNA has linked the identified challenges to the included best practices when possible. Greater awareness of these ongoing and complex challenges may help to spur additional research into potential solutions and can help crisis communications planning continuously improve.

One interviewee described a recent incident in which a tornado led to the widespread sharing of a video allegedly showing significant tornado damage to one town, but it was discovered that the video was several years old and from another state.

Challenge 1: Validating information and detecting and combating the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Social media monitoring can be a valuable source of information that can assist with many aspects of emergency response. However, social media information is sometimes unreliable and can be difficult to verify. Incorrect information can often appear genuine and circulate widely before being identified and repudiated. Detecting and responding to misinformation and disinformation can consume limited resources, with conspiracy theories being particularly hard to manage and combat.

Challenge 2: Keeping information up to date and preventing information from recirculating and becoming outdated. Several agencies indicated that it is challenging to keep up with the demand for information. The spread of outdated or no longer accurate information is often due to old posts recirculating. In addition, some social media sites use metadata-based algorithms to determine the order of posts rather than a time-based system, which can cause outdated information to recirculate on its own. These challenges increase

during incidents in which information is changing rapidly. Furthermore, issuing corrections later may hurt credibility and enable misinformation. For potentially applicable best practices, refer to **Best Practices 6 and 11.23**.

Challenge 3: Using humor appropriately for blue sky engagement. Humor attracts engagement but requires a measured approach. Overuse or inappropriate use of humor can lead to a loss of credibility. Several interviewees described a desire to pursue a humorous approach for blue sky engagement but expressed trepidation about unintentionally offending their residents. Interviews indicated that the risk may not be worth the reward. For potentially applicable best practices, refer to **Best Practice 11.11**.

Similarly, many interviewees expressed interest in engaging in online trends⁴ to increase engagement and reach new audiences but emphasized caution in doing so. For potentially applicable best practices, refer to **Best Practice 11.12**.

Challenge 4: Equally engaging all demographics and all levels of social media literacy. Several interviewees expressed concerns over ensuring that social media posts are accessible to all populations, including non-English speakers, those with low literacy, and those with low internet or social media literacy. Considering how to incorporate these populations into social media posting is important to ensure that all emergency management posts reach the widest audience possible. For potentially applicable best practices, refer to **Best Practice 11.7**.

Challenge 5: Maintaining a similar level of communication after an incident occurs, even when staff may be starting to experience burnout. The demand for information and engagement following a disaster can become burdensome to staff, particularly in smaller agencies with fewer social media personnel.

Challenge 6: Maintaining the health and well-being of staff during deployments. Dedicated social media staff activated in an emergency are at high risk for burnout resulting from high stress (such as acting as an ad hoc emergency services operator) and extended shifts and activation periods. Members of the public can even target social media personnel in retaliation for perceived slights or biases. For potentially applicable best practices, refer to **Best Practice 8**.

Challenge 7: Recruiting and retaining social media staff. Social media communication is a specialized skill set. Obtaining staff with these skills, or training staff to develop these skills, is critical to effectively managing an online presence. However, social media staffing often gets

⁴ Trends in this context refers to discussion topics, memes, short-form videos, and challenges that temporarily capture the attention of a wide audience and can quickly spread across major social media platforms. For example, a particular song or audio clip played over video content may add additional layers of meaning to the video.

deprioritized on the list of competing funding requirements, which can make recruiting and retaining such staff challenging.

Challenge 8: Managing social media responsibilities with small teams. Social media teams often consist of only one or two staff, and social media can sometimes be an ancillary duty. Many emergency management agencies across the country are small, and staff are required to fill multiple roles.

Challenge 9: Producing sophisticated graphics and videos. Interviewees noted that the challenge in producing quality graphics content has more to do with the time required than the skill level needed. Unfortunately, interviewees noted that high-quality graphics are important for capturing the public's attention.

Challenge 10: Navigating politics and partisanship.

Emergency management agencies are, by nature, apolitical. However, staying out of politics on social media is often challenging. Posts that seem innocuous to the PIO may stir up political discussion in the replies or comments. In addition, political tensions tied to broader policies or elected officials may influence interactions with the public or may lead to out-of-jurisdiction attention on social media that can overwhelm emergency management agencies.

One jurisdiction was inundated with thousands of replies from out-of-area Twitter users when then President Trump retweeted one of its hurricane-related updates.

Challenge 11: Reaching individuals in areas where cell phone and internet coverage may be sparse. Although there are more formal methods of communicating to residents in rural areas, including sirens and Wireless Emergency Alerts, these methods limit the amount of included information. Social media can facilitate more nuanced and fast-paced updates on rapidly changing situations to help residents prepare for oncoming disasters or evacuations.

Challenge 12: Incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) into social media operations. Some agencies are interested in AI's potential ability to help save time and make communications more efficient. AI could be used to respond to frequently asked questions or develop blue sky social media content. However, AI also poses risks, and agencies are hesitant to move forward without further guidance.

Best practices

Many agencies have adapted their approaches, procedures, and policies to the real-world challenges that they have observed or experienced. The findings below outline the best practices shared by stakeholders as well as their recommendations for other similar agencies.

Best Practices 1 to 10 were synthesized using related feedback from multiple emergency management agencies and represent more widely applicable best practices. CNA also identified 23 additional best practices representing those best practices that were recommended by only one agency. The additional best practices may be more limited in scope or relevant only to specific communities. As a result, they may not resonate with all emergency management agencies. CNA has opted to be inclusive in its presentation of best practices rather than selective.

Best Practice 1: Be adaptable in your communication methods because different emergencies require different approaches. One incident might benefit from more video updates, whereas another might require direct engagement and answering questions. Building a social media strategy based on one type of interaction will not be successful. It is better to be adaptable and pivot to different communication methods as needed. In addition, as an incident continues, changes in complexity, or ends, the public may need different levels of communication. Maintaining high levels of crisis communications over a long time may ultimately wear on the public and reduce their future engagement as they unfollow or mute organizations.

Best Practice 2: Build up trust and credibility with your audience throughout the year by regularly engaging online, especially by humanizing your agency, staff, and partner agencies. Building trust is a continuous effort that should be undertaken year-round. Posting during blue skies will help increase community trust and credibility. Build trust by engaging in responsive communications, sharing accurate and timely information, and sharing photos and videos of your organization and your partners. By humanizing the workforce through pictures and videos, communities learn about the dedicated people working to help protect the community. For this strategy, sincerity is more important than polish.

One state-level agency reported that it prepares a stockpile of statements and graphics on a given preparedness topic or event and distributes the file to the jurisdictions in its state to facilitate coordination and mitigate the strain on these smaller agencies.

Best Practice 3: Coordinate messaging with neighboring jurisdictions, community organizations, local agencies, and the state to ensure consistency across all of government.

Coordinate communications horizontally with partner agencies, neighboring jurisdictions, and community organizations and vertically between state, county, and local agencies. Partner with local agencies to ensure that everyone is pushing the same information. In addition, use similar graphics and information across partnerships. Creating plug-and-play graphics to

distribute to partners can help facilitate this effort and can help mitigate challenges with the workforce and bandwidth among smaller agencies. Alternatively, designate a lead agency and have partners share its posts. Doing so helps ensure that information is consistent and used in

the same format. Using a single voice for government helps the uniformity of the response. Using collaborative software can improve coordination as well. When information is different from that of neighboring jurisdictions, make sure to explain the differences. For example, evacuation orders often vary by jurisdiction, so communications should be clear about the reasoning and why following the most local order is important.

Best Practice 4: Maintain a cache of prepared messages to facilitate information distribution as appropriate. Events are overwhelming. Using preplanned, preapproved, and pre-translated messages can save time and avoid

One jurisdiction noted that preapproval for posts and pre-translation were the most critical because they saved the most time.

miscommunications. This practice may be particularly useful for no-notice or minimal-notice events. Prepare messages and graphics for all likely hazards categorized by "before," "during," and "after" the event. Furthermore, after every event, conduct a review to document recyclable materials, including frequently asked questions, hashtags, posts, and graphics.

Best Practice 5: Ensure that messaging is accessible to those with access and functional needs, is properly translated, and is culturally appropriate for intended audiences.

Include an access and functional needs subject matter expert in the Joint Information Center (JIC) as an accommodations officer. Limit the use of emojis because they are challenging for text-to-speech translators. Turn on captions in videos. Use Spanish and American Sign Language interpreters whenever possible. Secure translation services for frequently spoken languages within your jurisdiction and engage them during emergencies. Adjust your messaging to be culturally appropriate for the audience that you are trying to reach. Contact local embassies, nonprofits, and community organizations to identify trusted partners who can advise on cultural matters or provide volunteer translation services.

Best Practice 6: Provide information to the public proactively as it is learned, noting that this information is preliminary and subject to change. Although many PIOs are inclined to wait until messaging is perfected before putting out information, it may be better to provide information as it is learned. Doing so can buoy confidence in a concerned public and increase trust. Delaying information risks its becoming outdated, particularly for rapidly changing and life-threatening incidents. When using this strategy, note that the information presented is preliminary and may be updated and encourage readers to come back for more updates (e.g., "Here is what we know right now. This is an evolving situation that can change rapidly, so keep checking back for the latest news").

One jurisdiction set up automatic replies to all social media direct messages stating that the inbox is not monitored and advising the public to reply to an email address instead. Emails provide the jurisdiction with a mechanism to track and forward requests, and residents tend to include more information in emails than in direct messages.

Best Practice 7: Use social media to direct people toward landing pages and resources that could be useful, such as interactive maps. Social media is not the best medium for every type of information exchange. When information needs to be detailed (such as addressing questions about public health measures) or interactive (such as interactive maps that track wildfires), it is best to use social media to guide community members toward a website, email address, or online form. Regular posting and automatic replies to direct messages help achieve this strategy.

Best Practice 8: Develop a strategy for individuals using social media as emergency services operators. Emergency service operators, such as 911, can become overwhelmed or unreachable during or after a disaster, and people faced with life-threatening conditions may use social media to call for help. In these situations, people may contact emergency management on social media for aid or rescues or post that they are in need without tagging an agency. Emergency management agencies need a strategy and dedicated resources to respond to the individuals seeking help via social media. Staff should monitor social media for distressed individuals, validate their information, and set realistic expectations for those needing assistance. Emergency managers should also develop a procedure to share information with first responders quickly and effectively. Social media staff can experience burnout and trauma the same way 911 operators can but often do not have access to the same resources, understanding, and mental health protections. To mitigate this problem, rotate social media monitoring staff during an emergency, keep them on shorter shifts, and provide them with multiple breaks.

Best Practice 9: Respond quickly to misinformation and disinformation and direct the poster to valid sources of information. Agencies must address misinformation and disinformation quickly to limit the spread. Not all misinformation requires a response; smaller accounts with limited online impressions may not need engagement, but respond promptly to any posts involving life and safety. Coordinate with partner agencies to monitor social media for rumors and misinformation and disinformation and jointly respond. Adopt a professional and trustworthy tone and understand that this response is not only for the person spreading the misinformation or disinformation, but also for everyone else viewing the exchange on social media. Respond to misinformation and disinformation by directing people to valid sources of information when possible. When appropriate, address widespread misinformation with proactive information, such as a series of "MythBusters" videos. Work with trusted community partners to help address misinformation and disinformation. For severe instances of misinformation and disinformation, notify the Federal Bureau of Investigation and

Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. Importantly, know when to disengage; do not feed the trolls.

Best Practice 10: After the event, take stock of your metrics and wins and communicate the value of your social media crisis communications to leadership. Leadership may need to realize the impact of social media crisis communications on public trust or emergency response operations. Communicating the value added can help find future funding and other types of support for social media crisis communications. Look for different ways to clarify the importance of social media communications, such as a daily briefing of five key takeaways from social media monitoring.

Additional best practices

Additional best practices are best practices recommended by only one agency. The additional best practices may be more limited in scope or specific to the community that generated them. As a result, they may not be as broadly adoptable.

- 11.1. When a disaster occurs in your jurisdiction, familiarize yourself with the area on social media. Identify important accounts for the area, including law enforcement, local emergency management, area hospitals, and transportation providers. Look at who they follow. Set up notifications for posts from the most important accounts. These accounts can be a good source of verified information. Ideally, PIOs would know and follow key stakeholder accounts before disaster strikes. However, this is not always possible, particularly for larger jurisdictions, states, or understaffed emergency management agencies.
- 11.2. Use social media as your eyes and ears in the community: monitor social media for indications of community sentiment and use that information to inform decision-making. Use social media monitoring to ensure that your interventions have the intended impact and that the community responds positively.
- 11.3. Request information from the public to support decision-making (e.g., request photos of storm damage). In addition, use Twitter to track reports of damage and use SnapChat's "Snap Maps" feature to view pictures from the disaster-affected area.
- 11.4. Campaign to get all residents in the jurisdiction to use the same hashtag for all disasters, which will facilitate social media monitoring efforts by putting all information in one place and preventing situations in which there are multiple competing hashtags to track. Over time, the use of the hashtag will become automatic for long-term residents.
- 11.5. Use social media to give rapid updates from the scene of an incident, when appropriate, which can help to communicate the urgency of the situation.

- 11.6. Always provide context and next steps when sending an alert through social media; give people information that they can act on. Furthermore, never assume that readers will understand the implications of a given hazard, including how severe of a threat it may be for them or what actions they should take as a result.
- 11.7. Write at a fourth-grade reading level to ensure that posts are accessible to a wide number of individuals.
- 11.8. Engage with the community through direct messages and offer individualized support when needed.
- 11.9. Use social media to guide and organize volunteer efforts.
- 11.10. Be agile and prepared to pivot to new platforms. Different communities favor different platforms.
- 11.11. To mitigate the risk involved in using humor, have frank conversations with leadership about what might be appropriate for the community; discuss where to draw the line. Take advantage of the different environments on different platforms to determine where humorous postings are most appropriate. For example, emergency management agencies can take advantage of the relatively relaxed standards on Instagram to use humor more freely.
- 11.12. Use caution when participating in trends, and take time to understand the implications and subtext of the trend fully. Identify and review the source material to ensure that the trend is appropriate for government engagement.
- 11.13. When responding to social media comments, feel free to be less polished and more direct. Do not be afraid to push back a bit (e.g., remind residents that just because a disaster did not affect them does not mean the disaster did not affect other residents in the jurisdiction).
- 11.14. Right-size the number of accounts for the agency; more accounts can create confusion for residents and lead to excessive duplication of information during events.
- 11.15. For agencies with multiple accounts, designate one account that can post humorous things during blue skies but have all accounts mirror each other during emergencies.
- 11.16. Post roughly once per hour during an incident. Posting too frequently may cause panic, but insufficient posting fails to communicate the severity of the incident.
- 11.17. Date your social media posts to prevent stale, outdated, or no longer accurate information from circulating and feeding misinformation and disinformation.
- 11.18. Create videos that are not rooted in a particular time, date, or incident to use between emergencies.
- 11.19. Continuously learn about social media platforms. Between activations, staff should stay current on various platforms and work to acquire new skills.

- 11.20. Use software with analytic capabilities to identify ways to increase your engagement.
- 11.21. Have at least one backup agency. A backup agency is a secure, trusted agency with good cyber hygiene that has your agency's login information and "plug-and-play kit" with templates, contact list, and answers to frequently asked questions, all of which will allow them to make posts on your behalf should your area experience a major telecommunications failure. Although neighboring agencies often have strong relationships with each other, ensuring that your backup agency is in another part of the country can decrease the chances that the same local incident or event will affect both you and your backup agency.
- 11.22. Co-locate social media staff with 911 operators or a fusion center to facilitate an exchange of information.
- 11.23. Stay above the politics. Do not engage in political discussions or political back-and-forth on social media, particularly on issues outside of your agency's mission space.

Priority areas for growth

Interviewees identified the following areas in which they would like to increase their organization's proficiency or competency. Unsurprisingly, there is significant overlap between the priority areas for growth and the identified challenges. However, this section attempts to faithfully report the 11 self-identified priorities for the interviewees as insight into what emergency management PIOs believe requires the most urgent attention.

Growth Area 1: Expanding to different social media platforms. Many stakeholders want to expand engagement across more platforms, including how to strategically use each platform to increase reach and engagement, especially for different demographics. For example, they noted that more engagement across different platforms could help them reach younger audiences.

Growth Area 2: Using quantitative analysis tools to improve reach and engagement. Obtaining data on the effectiveness of social media usage to engage the community is necessary to determine which strategies are most effective. Furthermore, several interviewees hoped to use analytical software tools to analyze how the public engages with them, including identifying the most common requests and what areas the public would like to see more resources and attention dedicated to.

Growth Area 3: Expanding collaboration with partner agencies. Several agencies indicated they would like to increase the number of agencies that they coordinate with and set up collaborative spaces for that coordination to occur.

Growth Area 4: Becoming proactive rather than reactive. Although the nature of emergency management tends toward reactivity (especially with no-notice events), stakeholders noted the importance of becoming proactive in their social media strategies. Several interviewees indicated that they would like a more substantial and robust collection of prepared messages but lamented that frequent emergencies prevent them from making progress in that effort.

Growth Area 5: Building out data mining capabilities. Using Twitter application programming interfaces (API) and other data mining resources could allow agencies to mine data and create analytic products (e.g., a map identifying areas with flooding and debris). Although these products would require additional investigation and verification, they would be a helpful first step in assisting thinly staffed, geographically spread out, and isolated or cutoff communities.

Growth Area 6: Dedicating staff to social media full-time. Many jurisdictions struggle with lack of dedicated staff for social media communications. Many social media staff also have additional communications responsibilities, such as graphics or producing videos.

Growth Area 7: Securing translations and access and functional needs capabilities. Several interviewees discussed the difficulty in securing reliable, cost-effective translation services and described meeting all access and functional needs as an ongoing process.

Growth Area 8: Exploring best practices in using social media to harness volunteers during response and recovery. Volunteer management is often time-consuming and can cause additional burdens if not done efficiently and effectively.

Growth Area 9: Discontinuing the practice of issuing press releases. Some traditional media outlets are more likely to rely on social media sources than press releases for emergency news because they are more frequently updated.

Growth Area 10: Growing a more diversified workforce in the emergency management community. This growth area involves encouraging more women, members of minority groups, and people with access and functional needs to join the field.

Growth Area 11: Educating the public and eliminating misconceptions about the field of emergency management. This growth area involves building understanding among members of the public about the role of emergency managers before, during, and after an incident.

Conclusion

Social media will continue to evolve, and societal trends point toward its enduring role in how individuals consume news and information. To better understand and address the challenges emergency managers face when using social media in crisis communications and to collect, synthesize, and share approaches that might be useful to agencies across the country, CNA undertook a study to collect and synthesize best practices in using social media for crisis communications from state and local emergency management agencies. Overall, this study aimed to address gaps in crisis communications guidance for state and local emergency management agencies, identify actionable solutions to common challenges, catalog innovative best practices not recorded elsewhere, and offer exemplars as well as actionable recommendations.

Our study supports the initial assessment that guidance is lacking for state and local agencies on the best use of social media for crisis communications. In the absence of such guidance, agencies are developing their own policies and methods, and agencies across the country are developing similar lessons learned in response to real-world experiences. Although variations exist across emergency management agencies, as they do for communities and hazard profiles across the country, there seem to be several areas in which best practices could be widely adopted, such as addressing misinformation and disinformation, building trust and credibility with community members, coordinating messaging across agencies, and communicating nuanced information to the public. Further investigation into possible applications of more advanced social media mechanisms may be useful in some cases. For example, no agency was proficient in mining social media data to create analytical products, such as maps of storm debris, although several agencies expressed interest in such a capability.

As social media and its role in society continue to evolve—both the platforms themselves and the way individuals consume information and interact with their local officials—continuing to track the best practices and challenges of emergency management agencies and PIOs will only help improve social media crisis communications. Furthermore, in the absence of a collaborative platform in which PIOs from across the country can compare experiences and share recommendations with other similar agencies, studies such as this one will continue to play a role in breaking down silos and disseminating information. Ultimately, we hope that the information collected and synthesized by this study has provided good advice that will assist emergency management agencies across the country when conducting their crisis communications planning so that they will face fewer surprises when disaster strikes.

Appendix A: Interviewees

CNA gratefully acknowledges the following agencies and organizations' contributions to this paper.

Alaska Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Colorado Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

District of Columbia Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency

Florida Division of Emergency Management

Hawai'i Emergency Management Agency

Idaho Office of Emergency Management

Iowa Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Management

Kentucky Emergency Management

Maine Emergency Management Agency

Maryland Department of Emergency Management

Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency

Missouri State Emergency Management Agency

North Carolina Department of Public Safety

Ohio Emergency Management Agency

Sarasota County, Florida, Office of Emergency Management

Snohomish County, Washington, Department of Emergency Management

West Virginia Emergency Management Division

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. During a crisis, how does your agency mainly use social media? Could you please provide us with some examples in the context of recent real-world incidents?
2. How has the inclusion of social media altered your agency's strategies for crisis communications?
 - a. For example, the public may expect agencies to provide information more quickly than before? Or the public may demand more one-on-one communication with emergency management officials and personalized troubleshooting (e.g., via direct messages)?
 - b. What training courses, guidance documents, and other resources would you say were particularly helpful in shaping your agency's strategies for using social media during a crisis?
3. In your recent experiences with using social media for crisis communications, what challenges have you encountered?
 - a. What lessons learned or best practices have you identified as a result?
4. What mechanisms has your emergency management agency established for incorporating social media data into response operations?
 - a. What data products has your emergency management agency developed that incorporate social media data (e.g., maps that show all mentions of a certain hashtag)? How have these products been used (e.g., what decisions do they affect)?
5. What capabilities in social media or crisis communications are you looking to grow?
6. Have you seen any examples of innovative or impressive uses of social media from other organizations and agencies? If so, could you please elaborate?
7. What tools do you use for managing social media accounts or mining social media data?
8. What techniques or strategies do you use to combat misinformation and disinformation?
9. Based on your understanding of our project's objectives, is there anything that we didn't get a chance to discuss that you'd like us to know?

References

- Clark, D. (2022, Dec. 13). *Twitter will lose more than 32 million users worldwide by 2024 amid turmoil*. Insider Intelligence. <https://insiderintelligence.com/press-releases/twitter-will-lose-more-than-32-million-users-worldwide-by-2024-amid-turmoil/>.
- Counts, A., & Levine, J. (2023, July 24). "By turning Twitter into X, Elon Musk risks killing billions in brand value." *Time*. <https://time.com/6297303/twitter-x-rebrand-cost/>.
- Jamali, M., Nejat, A., Ghosh, S., Jin, F., & Cao, G. (2019). Social media data and post-disaster recovery. *International Journal of Information Management*, 44, 25–37. doi:10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.09.005.
- Meta Business Help Center. (n.d.). *About local alerts*. <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/1064049677089136?id=1549080658590154>.
- Perrin, A., & Anderson, M. (2019, Apr. 10). *Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>.
- Top 9 growing social media platforms in the US*. (2023, June 29). MixBloom. <https://www.mixbloom.com/resources/top-8-growing-social-media-platforms-in-the-us>.
- Walker, M., & Matsa, K.E. (2021, Sept. 20). *News consumption across social media in 2021*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2021/09/20/news-consumption-across-social-media-in-2021/>.
- Zou, L., Liao, D., Lam, N.S.N., Meyer, M., Gharaibeh, N., Cai, H., Zhou, B., & Li, D. (2017). *Social media for emergency rescue: An analysis of rescue requests on Twitter during Hurricane Harvey*. <https://arxiv.org/ftp/arxiv/papers/2111/2111.07187.pdf>.

This report was written by CNA's Safety and Security Division (SAS).

SAS works to help improve decision-making during crisis operations and foster innovative solutions to challenges in the areas of public safety, emergency management, public health preparedness, homeland security, risk management, and national security.

LIMITED PRINT AND ELECTRONIC DISTRIBUTION RIGHTS: CNA intellectual property is provided for noncommercial use only. CNA makes no warranties of any kind, either expressed or implied, as to any matter including, but not limited to, warranty of fitness for purpose or merchantability, exclusivity, or results obtained from the use of the material. Unauthorized posting of this publication online is prohibited. Permission is given to duplicate this document for noncommercial use only, as long as it is unaltered and complete. Permission is required from CNA to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of its research documents for commercial use. Contact CNA's Office of General Counsel at 703-824-2702 if you wish to make commercial use of any content in this document. The material in this report may be reproduced by or for the US government pursuant to the copyright license under the clause at DFARS 252.227-7013 (February 2014).

This report may contain hyperlinks to websites and servers maintained by third parties. CNA does not control, evaluate, endorse, or guarantee content found in those sites. We do not assume any responsibility or liability for the actions, products, services, and content of those sites or the parties that operate them.



Dedicated to the Safety and Security of the Nation

CNA is a not-for-profit research organization that serves the public interest by providing in-depth analysis and result-oriented solutions to help government leaders choose the best course of action in setting policy and managing operations.