

Emergency Management Fact Sheet – Highlighting Research to Practice

Research Article: Digital Volunteers in Emergency Management

Citation: Bout, Danjel L. (2019). *Digital Volunteers in Emergency Management* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/62786>

Background:

“Digital volunteers are self-organized collectives of individuals connected by the internet and social media who attempt to organize and process information during catastrophic scenarios.” Dr. Bout’s intent with this research was to fill “a gap in the existing research by examining whether digital volunteers can aggregate and synthesize social media data during a crisis event for U.S. based public safety agencies, and whether there are organizational impediments to integrating this practice.” His information was gathered through interviews with six senior leaders of large public safety agencies using eighteen questions focused on their experience with social media, how their agencies used it in day-to-day as well as emergency operations, and possible obstacles to its effectiveness. From the research four themes became evident about the use of social media: 1) there is an expectation of two-way communication; 2) it is difficult to judge the truth; 3) it is challenging to find technical experts with public safety insight to build situational awareness; and 4) it is not a familiar hierarchical flow of information. However, the emergency operations center has the potential to increase its effectiveness. The question addressed is “Can emergency management organizations utilize digital volunteers as a tool to integrate the unstructured data available through social media platforms to enhance crisis sensemaking during the response phase of disasters?” The responses of emergency management professionals across the nation indicated a resounding yes. A gap must be filled, though, between understanding the potential capabilities the volunteers bring and their utilization.

Practitioner Takeaways:

- Recognize the impact of social media as close to 70 percent of all Americans use social media, and eight out of every ten online Americans participate in social media actively.
- Create a social media liaison position within the incident command structure as the interface between digital volunteers and emergency response operations.
- Create standard operating procedures for collection, synthesis, and integration of social media.
- Develop tools to vet, aggregate, index, and integrate social media into situational awareness
- Consider how to use social media to provide context in an incident (such as mapping) and making that information openly available.
- Without integrating social media and other open source data, public safety disciplines can find themselves with less information than even ad-hoc volunteer groups in catastrophic scenarios.
- Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOSTs) are designed to leverage pre-screened and identified volunteers who understand the needs of emergency managers and can provide support via the internet to site responders who may be overwhelmed by the data generated in a disaster.
- The literature review suggests that digital volunteers have the demonstrated ability to integrate information available on social media platforms to enhance situational awareness in disasters.

Where to find this item: For more specific details about this topic, review the full article, which is [publicly available](#).

Bulletin provided by the International Association of Emergency Managers.

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