

**HASHTAG HELP: RED CROSS TWITTER COMMUNICATIONS DURING
DISASTERS**

Introduction

Communications networks have transformed the way the world works. Paul Starr, professor of public affairs at Princeton and author of *The Creation of the Media: The Political Origins of Modern Communication*, details the development of modern communications in the public sphere as that “of openly accessible information and communication about matters of general concern.”¹ More recently, the Internet has transformed the way the world works. The advent of new technologies used in the public sphere has improved the ability of humanitarian organizations to bring attention to “matters of general concern,” or issues of interest to the greater public, such as disaster response efforts.

On March 21, 2006, Jack Dorsey sent his first tweet on the platform then known as Twtr.² While vowels came later, Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, explained that “The definition was a short burst of inconsequential information.” Since 2006, more than 300 million people, including political leaders, have taken to Twitter on a monthly basis, and Twitter has become a source for information and opinions as well as a tool of organizations seeking to communicate in times of disaster.³ In fact, in 2018, Dorsey told the United States Senate Intelligence Committee, “We want to be a global town square, where people from around the world come together in an open and free exchange of ideas.”⁴ Through research on disaster response and social media trends, and interviews with current and former Red Cross Social Media team members, this

¹ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 24.

² Lamiat Sabin, “Happy Birthday Twitter: First Ever Tweet Was Sent Nine Years Ago Today,” *Independent*, March 21, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/happy-birthday-twitter-first-ever-tweet-was-sent-nine-years-ago-today-10124686.html>.

³ Sabin, “Happy Birthday Twitter.”

⁴ *Foreign Influence Operations’ Use of Social Media Platforms: Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence*, Senate, 115th Cong, 2nd sess., September 5, 2018, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/os-jdorsey-090518.pdf>

article examines the American Red Cross and their Digital Disaster Operations Center, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the Red Cross' use of Twitter, as well as opportunities for growth and threats to the program. This article focuses on Twitter, and not other social media platforms, because of its use in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, when the author was working for the Red Cross in Indiana.

Organizational Overview

When an earthquake devastated Haiti on January 12, 2010, the Red Cross had already begun to integrate social media into disaster communications. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the American Red Cross Twitter account, @RedCross, began receiving tweets from or about people in need of assistance. This marked a turning point, as the Red Cross “began to figure out how to use Twitter ... as a tool to engage with people.”⁵ Prior to 2010, the Red Cross disaster communication strategy had been to get information to people in need of help or in a position to help. The growth of social media during disaster response added a third element: getting information from people—“finding the needs in the haystack,” as former American Red Cross Director of Information Management and Situational Awareness Wendy Harman notes.⁶ These needs ranged from requests for shelter to reports of people trapped from users on the scene.⁷ The use of Twitter as part of the public sphere has endured, as more people turn to the internet for news in times of disaster, and the Red Cross has taken advantage of the technology to increase communication with volunteers, clients, and partners.

⁵ Beth Pullias (social engagement strategist, American Red Cross), discussion with the author, October 26, 2016.

⁶ Wendy Harman (director, Information Management and Situational Awareness, Red Cross), discussion with the author, November 2, 2016.

⁷ Mercedes Bunz, “In Haiti Earthquake Coverage, Social Media Gives Victim a Voice,” *The Guardian*, January 14, 2010, www.theguardian.com/media/pda/2010/jan/14/socialnetworking-haiti.

Social media can be used in disasters by humanitarian organizations to “identify needs and orient the response, gauge the scope of impact and provide info.”⁸ The Red Cross is just one of many organizations to use social media. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) also has a strong social media presence. Paralleling the Red Cross’ response, the earthquake in Haiti was also a turning point for MSFs’ communications structure, and the organization embraced Twitter as a tool for lobbying.⁹ Seizing on the value of Twitter for its “immediacy and potential high visibility,” to reach people, MSF has continued to use Twitter, along with other tools, to inform and advocate.¹⁰

Analysis

In the summer of 2010, the Red Cross organized an Emergency Social Data Summit to unite government and non-profit disaster response organizations with technology companies to develop a plan to “harness the power of new media.”¹¹ In the Summit’s white paper, the Red Cross asserted “social technologies have altered communication patterns, particularly in times of

⁸ American Red Cross, *The Case for Integrating Crisis Response with Social Media*, (Washington, DC. Blanchard, Carvin, et al, 2010), accessed August 10, 2018, <https://www.scribd.com/document/35737608/White-Paper-The-Case-for-Integrating-Crisis-Response-With-Social-Media>; Peter Landwehr and Kathleen Carley, “Social Media in Disaster Relief: Usage Patterns, Data Mining Tools, and Current Research Directions,” *Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery for Big Data*, (2014): 234.

⁹ Gerald Kane, “The American Red Cross Adding Digital volunteers to Its Ranks,” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, (May 23, 2014): 1; Lina Eidmar, “Social Media—A Possibility to Do Global Communication on a Small Budget,” *Medecins Sans Frontiers*, accessed November 3, 2018, <https://www.slideshare.net/Lina81/msf-in-social-media-during-the-haiti-emergency>, (October 2010).

¹⁰ Eidmar, “Social Media”

¹¹ American Red Cross, *Invitation: Emergency Social Data Summit* (2010), accessed August 10, 2018, <http://redcrosschat.org/about-the-emergency-social-data-summit>

disaster.”¹² The paper also noted that societal expectations had changed, with more people using social media in disaster situations and with those users expecting timely responses.¹³

With assistance from Dell, Inc., the Red Cross launched the Digital Disaster Operations Center (the DigiDOC) in March of 2012. It ran a heat map and word cloud, monitoring topic profiles and keywords such as #RedCross and #Tornado across social media platforms.¹⁴ The DigiDOC was field tested during Hurricane Isaac and was live during Hurricane Sandy, which pummeled the United States’ Eastern Seaboard, including New York City, in October 2012. Hurricane Sandy impacted a high concentration of technologically savvy clients and was an early example of people turning to social media for assistance. Throughout the storm and its aftermath, the Red Cross used paid staff and volunteers to monitor social media—responding directly to pleas for assistance while pushing information out to communities in need.

Strengths

The strengths of the Red Cross social media program are rooted in its reach, its cutting-edge DigiDOC, and its workforce. With close to 3.5 million followers on Twitter and an average of 4000 social contacts daily, the Red Cross ranks among the top ten nonprofits using the platform.¹⁵ The Red Cross is respected, which, due to careful cultivation, holds true for @RedCross. Twitter enables the Red Cross to get real-time information that it can use to impact service.¹⁶ Twitter also serves as an alternative vehicle for the Red Cross to transmit information to communities both in need and in a position to help, 280 characters at a time. The Red Cross

¹² American Red Cross, *Crisis Response*, (Washington, DC: Blanchard, Carvin, et al, 2010): 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ American Red Cross, *Digital Operations Center for Humanitarian Relief*.

¹⁵ American Red Cross, *Social Media Handbook*, 5; “Top Nonprofits on Twitter,” accessed January 2017, topnonprofits.com/lists/top-nonprofits-on-twitter/.

¹⁶ Pullias, discussion.

workforce is ninety percent volunteer staff, and staff and volunteers monitor the DigiDOC 24-7 in times of disaster.¹⁷

Since 2012, the DigiDOC has become a “part of the organization’s DNA,” as social media is used for both listening and responding to the community.¹⁸ The Red Cross uses social media to “mobilize the power of volunteers and the generosity of donors on the social web,”¹⁹ with Twitter used for sharing or gathering news.

The Red Cross initially turned to social media to engage volunteers, and while this mission now includes service in disasters, volunteers continue to be its greatest strength.²⁰ The mobile nature of Twitter combined with the national Red Cross volunteer network enables constant monitoring. This monitoring informs staff of areas of need, enables quick responses, and serves as a method of rumor control. Rumors impede response operations. DigiDOC monitoring enables staff to flag areas of concern and tamps down rumors by distributing accurate information.

Weaknesses

The Red Cross has done an admirable job of embracing the technological revolution of the past decade, but issues persist. While technology has given the Red Cross new communication tools, the use of the technology is also a weakness. Twitter users tend to be young.²¹ Meanwhile, the economically distressed and elderly are particularly vulnerable in times of disaster, and this vulnerability is increased when information is disseminated on platforms

¹⁷ American Red Cross, *Disaster Volunteers*, (Washington, D.C., 2018).

<http://www.redcross.org/volunteer/volunteer-opportunities/disaster-volunteer>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ American Red Cross, *Social Media Handbook*, (Washington, D.C., 2012): 9.

²⁰ Harman, discussion.

²¹ American Red Cross, *Crisis Response*, 15.

they cannot or do not use. Finally, Twitter runs on the Internet, and when connectivity is weakened or the system is overloaded, information dispersed on Twitter does not reach those directly impacted by the disaster, and users cannot report their needs to the Red Cross.²²

Currently, the American Red Cross uses Twitter in English and relies on the platform's software to translate messages into other languages. The Red Cross also operates *Cruz Roja*, a Spanish language website for the American Red Cross, and, in times of disaster, local chapters with high concentrations of Spanish-speaking residents will often retweet translated messages from @RedCross, but this activity is piecemeal. To increase its reach and reduce delays in dissemination, the Red Cross will also need to increase its language capacity.²³

While the Red Cross uses people and software to monitor Twitter, these are also weaknesses of the program. Twitter is user-driven. Monitoring software is subject to human error, as a misspelled or misused keyword might not be flagged by software or by staff.²⁴ Following the terrorist attacks at the Boston Marathon in 2013, people used multiple keywords that made events difficult to track.²⁵ Additionally, the Red Cross uses Twitter to track and respond to rumors, but rumors can run rampant on Twitter, damaging relief operations by causing confusion and delays in service.

Information on Twitter is often relevant for its “immediacy.”²⁶ The amount and impact of this data are weak links in the program. There are more than 500 million tweets daily, which increases in times of disaster. Reports from the scene help organizations know what is going on

²² Castillo, 129.

²³ Pullias, discussion.

²⁴ Landwehr and Carley, 18.

²⁵ Dina Fine Maron, “How Social Media Is Changing Disaster Response,” *Scientific American*, June 7, 2013, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-social-media-is-changing-disaster-response/>.

²⁶ Castillo, 79.

and where help is needed, but these reports can be hard to find when there is a surplus of information.²⁷ The Red Cross tracks engagement on social media via numbers of likes, mentions, and retweets, as well as through data relayed to response teams, such as requests for food to be sent to a community.²⁸ But, like many organizations, the Red Cross has yet to figure out how to track the real impact of its social media programming, as there is no data on how information from tweets impacts clients or donors.

Opportunities

In times of disaster, Internet and social media use increased dramatically.²⁹ As Twitter grows, the reach of the Red Cross on Twitter will also grow. Traditional news organizations monitor Twitter for information, and once that information is confirmed, it is reported so that non-traditional @RedCross followers, such as the elderly or non-English speakers, will also benefit.³⁰ The expansion of the network of users will enable Red Cross messaging to spread, and will also enable the Red Cross to track more viable information through Twitter.

The Red Cross is in the process of building a digital volunteer program.³¹ Digital volunteering, “the practice of performing volunteer work using digital technologies,” is a growing trend with non-profits, and enables the agency to involve volunteers beyond the scope of the disaster.³² As with all response operations, the digital volunteer program would be rooted in a local chapter. Red Cross volunteer deployments typically require travel to the scene of the

²⁷ Sabin, “Happy Birthday Twitter”; Dimiter Velez and Plamena Zlateva, “Use of Social Media in National Disaster Management,” *International Proceedings of Economic Development and Research* (2012): 43, www.ipedr.com/vol39/009-ICITE2012-B00019.pdf

²⁸ Pullias, discussion; American Red Cross, “Hurricane Sandy Social Media Engagement,” (Washington, D.C., December 28, 2012).

²⁹ Castillo, 19

³⁰ Landwehr and Carley, 10.

³¹ Pullias, discussion.

³² Castillo, 96

disaster for three weeks at a time. The advent of digital deployments would enable volunteers to deploy for disasters without having to leave home for weeks.³³ This would expand the volunteer pool to include more technologically savvy volunteers who could be engaged both during the disaster and during non-disaster activities. There is also an opportunity for the American Red Cross to expand its social media relationship with its governing body, the International Federation of the Red Cross, through multilingual communications, and increased and coordinated messaging.

In addition to using Twitter to glean information for response activities, the Red Cross has used Twitter to engage volunteers, clients, and donors. This is a different approach from many other organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontiers, which uses Twitter for advocacy. MSF communications protocol states that Twitter “can be an important tool for exerting leverage on key stakeholders.”³⁴ During the Haiti earthquake response, MSF used Twitter to press for specific action: aid delivery. MSF tweeted at the US Air Force and others to request permission for relief planes to land or lobby for supply caravan access.³⁵ The Red Cross has used Twitter for general information gathering and dissemination, as well as volunteer, donor, and client engagement, but it has not yet used Twitter for advocacy. Without endangering foundational institutional neutrality, the Red Cross should explore how to use Twitter for public advocacy.

Threats

³³ Harman, discussion.

³⁴ Médecins Sans Frontiers, *Social Media Strategy*, 25

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24

The primary threat to Red Cross' continued use of Twitter is the security and financial viability of Twitter. Twitter is not consistently profitable.³⁶ If not monetized appropriately, support for the platform could fade and Twitter could go the way of MySpace or Vine. This is beyond the control of the Red Cross, but it needs to be considered. A failure of technology due to a software glitch or a hack could impede a response operation, especially if people are accustomed to using Twitter for information.³⁷ Additionally, the Red Cross must continue to work with emergency management agencies to ensure Twitter is not treated as a surrogate 911 system. Finally, if volunteers overstep their bounds or @RedCross is misused, this could damage the reputation of the Red Cross.

Findings

The Red Cross and other organizations have done an admirable job embracing technological advances in technology to increase the size and impact of the public sphere. The Red Cross has been a pioneer in its use of Twitter to disseminate information to communities in need as well as to engage with members of the community—both to provide and to request assistance. By taking advantage of its volunteer base, the Red Cross has enhanced its ability to engage via social media, but it has also opened itself up to an increased risk of human error or technological failure. To capitalize on the new media and Dorsey's digital public square the Red Cross should seek to enhance its digital volunteer corps, increase linguistic diversity, and adopt some of the practices of other humanitarian organizations, which will require the commitment of the Red Cross to pursue digital media as a pillar of its disaster communication strategy.³⁸ In

³⁶ Hayley Tsukayama, "Why Twitter Is Now Profitable for the First Time Ever," *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2018, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/02/08/why-twitter-is-now-profitable-for-the-first-time-ever/>

³⁷ Velev and Zlateva, 45.

³⁸ Jack Dorsey, (@jack), "We believe many people use Twitter as a digital public space," September 5, 2018, 6:59 am, <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1037399093084151808>

order for social media programming to thrive, the Red Cross must continue to invest in developing accessible, attractive, measurable, and multilingual social media programming as an integral part of disaster communications for communities in need of information, communities in need of help, and communities in a position to help.

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