

Connecting to vulnerable persons through social media

Insights into good practice for organisations and community groups

This project was conducted by Dr Stan Karanasios, Professor Vanessa Cooper, Associate Professor Marta Poblet-Balcell and Dr Peter Hayes from RMIT University and was funded by Emergency Management Victoria as part of the National Disaster Resilience Grants Scheme. The views presented in this resource are those of the authors only.

See www.cpow.org.au (projects) for further details on the project and our full report, or contact Dr Stan Karanasios stan.karanasios@rmit.edu.au.

This resource is designed for non-government organisations (NGOs), community based organisations (CBOs) and informal community groups that are involved in information sharing during emergencies. It is a starting point to help them consider how they can use social media to engage vulnerable persons during emergencies. It is intended to be a guide rather than an all-inclusive 'how to' manual. It may also be useful for formal organisations—such as emergency response organisations (EROs)—seeking to understand how vulnerable persons use social media during emergencies.

The content in this resource is based on an Australian study that examined how social media is used by organisations such as government agencies, EROs, local councils, NGOs, CBOs, private businesses and informal social media groups to share information with vulnerable persons during emergencies. By vulnerable we mean those who because of their circumstances

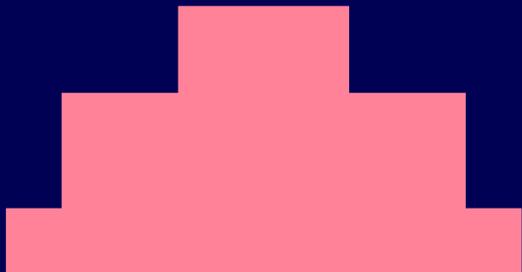
in their everyday lives may require some support to ensure their welfare during an emergency or adverse weather event.

Part A presents the study findings and insights into good practice for organisations. Part B presents findings from a survey on the use of social media by vulnerable persons during emergencies.



Examples of vulnerable groups:

Elderly, disabled, geographically or socially isolated, temporarily ill or injured, without transportation, looking after pets and livestock.



Part A: Study findings and insights into good practice

The study examined a range of organisations (formal and informal), social media messages shared by organisations, and how vulnerable persons use social media during emergencies.

Organisational level findings

There is a tension between top-down information dissemination by government organisations and the information needs of communities and individuals. We live in a hyper-personalised world and this means individuals expect tailored,

context and location specific emergency information. Digital technologies—particularly social media—have contributed to a more complex and dynamic information landscape with a range of actors providing information during emergencies (see Figure below).¹

Social media level findings

The information provided on social media by EROs and government agencies is generally not tailored to specific groups.²

Individual level findings

Social media is used by vulnerable persons in a range of ways and for different purposes in emergencies. They are often heavy users of social media, rely on social media community groups, place high-value on information provided by government agencies, often actively share information and often encounter information from social media indirectly through ‘information brokers’.

Platforms

The most popular social media platforms used by organisations include Facebook and Twitter (some organisations use other platforms such as Instagram and Weibo). Each platform offers different functions and formats, for example: text, pictures, video and sound and ways to connect people and share information. As the number of platforms and user preferences continues to evolve an important consideration is identifying which platforms individuals use, shifting user habits and information behaviour, as well as the interplay between the different platforms.

For example, during 2017, about one in six (17%) Australian social media users stopped using at least one of their social media platforms, 29% of users spent more time on social media, and 17% reduced their time spent on social media (Yellow 2018).³

The different ways social media can be used by organisations

Talking

Providing regular interactions and updates. Ensuring the discussion is active is important to ensure that individuals contribute, are alert to important messages and engage with social media content.

Listening

Listening to what the community is saying and monitoring the messages and discussions taking place. Tools exist such as Hootsuite and Sproutsocial to allow organisations to listen to multiple social media platforms.

Supporting and engaging

Nurturing and supporting the community and addressing questions. Individuals increasingly use social media as the place to seek information, ask questions, express concerns and make sense of emergencies.

Figure 1 below shows the range of actors in our study, the digital tools they employ and how they are used.

| Type of organisation | | | | | | |
|---|---|----------------------|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|--|
| Formal 'One source, one message' paradigm | Government and emergency response organisations | Municipal government | Businesses and other organisations | Non-government/ community based organisations | Informal community groups | Informal Contextualised for local requirements |

| Predominant tools and channels | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|--|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Official, largely top down | Website, agency app, Facebook, Twitter, traditional media, SMS | Website, Facebook, Twitter information | Websites, Facebook, Twitter, firm-platforms | Websites, Facebook | Facebook (groups), SMS, WhatsApp | Network, largely peer-based |
| Main use | Provide guidance and information to community; engage with the wider community; gather intelligence. | Relay official advice | Relay official advice, a forum for sharing of information/networking; localized intelligence; 'go to' source of information. | | | |

¹ Karanasios, S., Cooper, V., Poblet-Balcell, M., & Hayes, P. (2019). Inter-organizational Collaboration, Information Flows, and the Use of Social Media During Disasters: a focus on vulnerable communities. Paper presented at the Hawaii Conference on Systems Sciences, Maui. January 9-11.

² Poblet-Balcell, M., Cooper, V., & Karanasios, S. 2018. Look After Your Neighbours: Social Media and Vulnerable Groups during Extreme Weather Events. Paper presented at the Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management (ISCRAM) Asia-Pacific, Wellington. November 5-7.

³ Yellow (2018) Yellow Social Media Report 2018 – Consumers. Melbourne. www.yellow.com.au/social-media-report

Part A: Study findings and insights into good practice

Three strategies that can be used to engage vulnerable communities:



Broadcasting

Posting emergency related information, advice and warnings



Crowdsourcing

Tapping into local knowledge, experience, images and local updates



Finding and engaging information brokers

Trusted intermediaries for vulnerable persons

Broadcasting information from emergency agencies or local governments

This involves tapping into existing authoritative sources of information and relaying it to communities. In Victoria [emergency.vic.gov.au](https://www.emergency.vic.gov.au) and ABC Emergency¹ are examples of warnings from official sources. It is also useful to tap into and share content from the VicEmergency App, social media e.g. @CFA_updates, and websites [ses.vic.gov.au](https://www.ses.vic.gov.au) (some of these have information in multiple languages). Generally these sources will post information on (i) type of threat; (ii) issuing agency; (iii) affected area; (iv) action required; (v) information about where further information can be found; and (vi) where relevant, the timing of the threat impact (e.g. when a cyclone would be expected to make landfall).

Crowdsourcing

Involves using local knowledge and experience to enhance preparation and understanding of threats e.g. people can post pictures, local updates, past experiences etc. This acts as a complement to broadcast information and helps with personal sense making.

Finding information brokers

Often vulnerable persons may not use social media but receive information through trusted intermediaries or 'information brokers'. Connecting to these information brokers is a key method of disseminating important messages e.g. carers, neighbours, children of elderly.



Content: Content should be easy to read and understand. Use simple language, bullet points, clear headings, images, graphics, and video where appropriate—increasingly individuals expect visual content. Ask questions to elicit responses and engage on a regular basis.

Relevance: Relate to your expertise and local community, and to the services and value you offer to the community. It is important to make clear what the role of your organisation is (and isn't).

Setting appropriate rules of engagement: Set out the rules around who can contribute (and what content can be posted) and who is responsible for managing the content on social media groups/pages. This should be aligned with the resources and expertise your organisation has to enforce the rules.

Privacy and sensitivity: Be mindful of privacy and security considerations—social media can magnify privacy and sensitivity issues around vulnerability.

Consider the interplay between social media and other mediums

- Community meetings
- Face to face
- Pamphlets/flyers/brochures/fact sheets
- Print newsletters
- Email newsletters
- Notice boards
- Posters/billboards
- Local newspapers
- TV/Radio
- SMS/Apps
- Websites

¹ For a list of Emergency Broadcasters, see <https://files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Emergency-Broadcasters-list-1-December-2016.pdf>

Part A: Study findings and insights into good practice

Good practice for using social media to engage vulnerable persons:

- Vulnerable persons trust messages from official sources and find them helpful. At the same time, they rely on information from community social media groups because it is tailored to their needs. Therefore, NGOs, CBOs and informal community groups are important outlets for re-posting and sharing links and messages from official sources.
- During emergencies individuals often spend more time than a 'typical' day on social media. Therefore, organisations not using social media may be missing an opportunity to provide information to their community groups. The types of information vulnerable individuals search for are: conditions or warnings, damage caused by the event, road or traffic conditions, location of family or friends, information about how others are coping, what to do to keep safe, and eyewitness photos or videos.
- Vulnerable persons obtain information through information brokers—messages can (and should) target information brokers (e.g. middle-aged women because they are more likely to look after young children and older parents) that can pass on critical information.
- Vulnerable persons are increasingly expecting that EROs and government agencies should regularly monitor social media and respond rapidly. Organisations should be aware that users' expectations on how organisations use and respond on social media during emergencies is growing. This may require allocating more resources towards social media information and engagement strategies.

- Vulnerable persons can also be a valuable resource—tap into their knowledge and experience. For instance, older persons often have multiple experiences of the same or similar incidents and consequently have developed useful tacit knowledge from these previous experiences.

Challenges to using social media to engage vulnerable persons

- Identifying vulnerable persons is an ongoing challenge, especially given the transient nature of the risk factors surrounding vulnerability.
- Social media allows individuals to adapt and change the message, meaning that organisations can quickly lose control of the conversation.
- Misinformation, rumours and false information can lead to uncertainty by information consumers.
- Resources to monitor and govern content are a longstanding challenge to using social media effectively.
- Understanding the information needs of vulnerable groups is still under researched.
- Overcoming bias against vulnerability: many individuals do not consider themselves as at-risk and therefore will not pay attention to targeted messaging.
- As more informal organisations provide information during emergencies there is a need to explain how they can better interact and complement the information strategies of formal organisations.

Useful resources

Communicating in Recovery:

redcross.org.au/communicatinginrecovery

Disaster Recovery Toolkit for Local Government:

emv.vic.gov.au/how-we-help/disaster-recovery-toolkit-for-local-government

Getting Started on Social Media—For Community Groups and Local Governments:

mycommunitylife.com.au/files/0f2f5a86-099f-42db-8e2a-a4bb00ad3640/My-Community-Life-User-Guide-Social-Media-Policy-Guidelines-and-Response-Guide-June-2015.pdf

Red Cross Ready Plan:

redcross.org.au/prepare

Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness (PCEP). Starting a conversation with vulnerable persons:

sydney.edu.au/health-sciences/cdrp/projects/UOS_PrepereNSW_user_guide_FINAL_v2.pdf

List of Emergency Broadcasters:

files-em.em.vic.gov.au/public/EMV-web/Emergency-Broadcasters-list-1-December-2016.pdf

A Guide to Staying Informed During Emergencies:

business.vic.gov.au/tourism-industry-resources/Business-Tools-and-Support/crisis-management-guide/plan/stay-informed#

Public Information, Warnings and Building Community Resilience:

knowledge.aidr.org.au/collections/handbook-collection/

Countering Incorrect and False Information:

www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/SMWG_Countering-False-Info-Social-Media-Disasters-Emergencies_Mar2018-508.pdf

Examples of who to follow, re-post and share on social media (in Victoria):

Emergency warnings and advice:

twitter.com/vicemergency
facebook.com/vicemergency
twitter.com/vicsesnews
bom.gov.au/vic/warnings
facebook.com/Melbourne.MFB
twitter.com/MFB_NEWS
facebook.com/cfavic
twitter.com/cfa_updates

Health alerts:

facebook.com/VicGovDHHS

Road closures and traffic alerts:

facebook.com/VicRoads

Part B: Findings on how vulnerable persons use social media during emergencies

Based on a survey of 215 Victorian social media users who identified as being either over 60 years old, geographically or socially isolated, suffering from physical limitations and/or of low socioeconomic means.



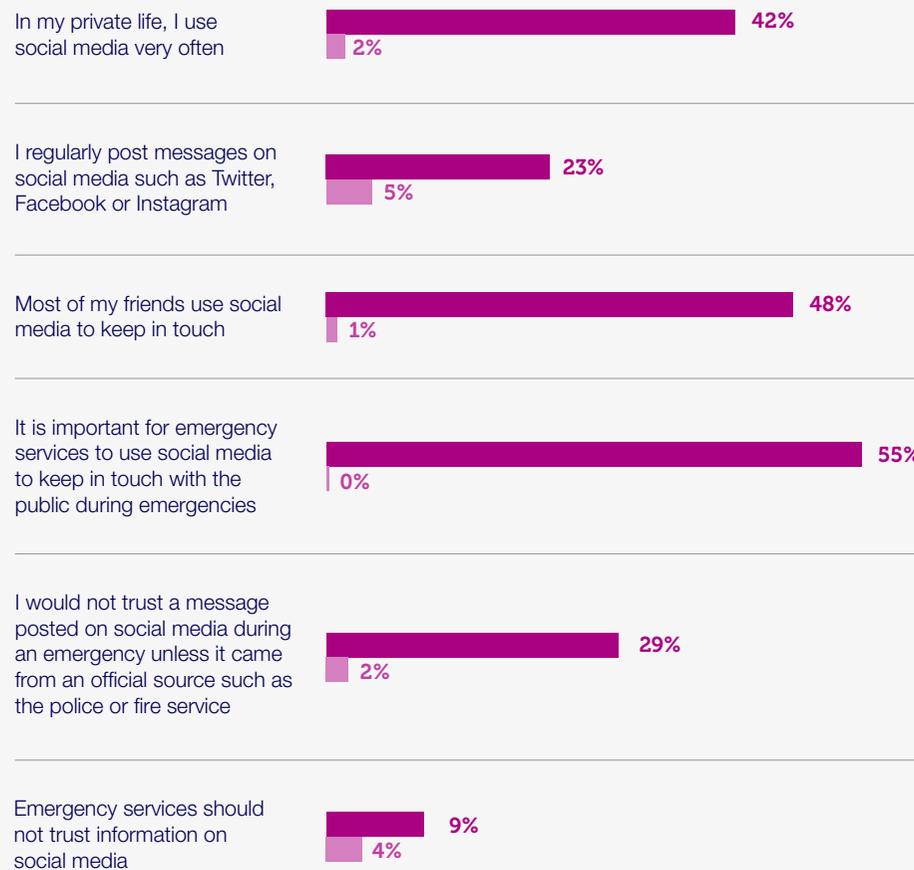
Current use of social media



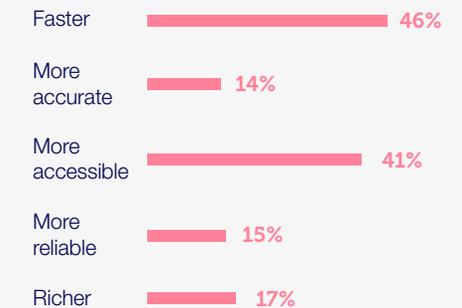
Expectations of emergency services



Attitude towards social media



Attitude towards social media as an information source (Strongly Agree)



Knowledge about social media services (Very Aware)



Part B: Findings on how vulnerable persons use social media during emergencies



The different communication channels used for gathering information on emergencies

87%

TV news

73%

Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)

72%

Online news

61%

Local radio station

59%

Online sites for extreme weather, agencies or emergency services

56%

Text message alerts

45%

Mobile apps



The organisational sources of information on social media considered to be most helpful

Emergency response organisations (e.g. police, fire brigade) 40%

Government agencies (e.g. Department of Health & Human services, Bureau of Meteorology) 27%

Non-government organisations (e.g. Red Cross, Salvation Army) 18%

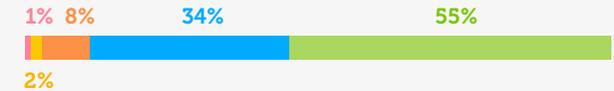
Local government (e.g. Local council) 15%

Local community groups (e.g. Grey Nomads, Surf clubs) 16%

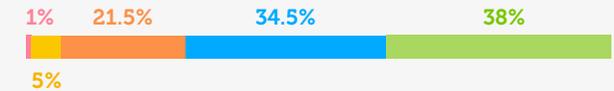
Local online groups (e.g. Twitter feed or Facebook page of local community group) 16%



Prediction on the future use of social media for gathering information



Prediction on the future use of social media for sharing information



Very likely (green), Quite likely (blue), Neutral (orange), Not very likely (yellow), Not at all likely (red)

The types of information gathered

85% Weather conditions or warnings
 66% Damage caused by the event
 65% Road or traffic conditions

55% The location or status of friends/family
 49% Information about how others are coping with the extreme weather event

49% What to do to keep yourself safe
 47% Eyewitness photographs or videos

55%



Reported using social media more during extreme weather events when compared to a typical day

38%



Reported that they are less active on social media during extreme weather events

7%

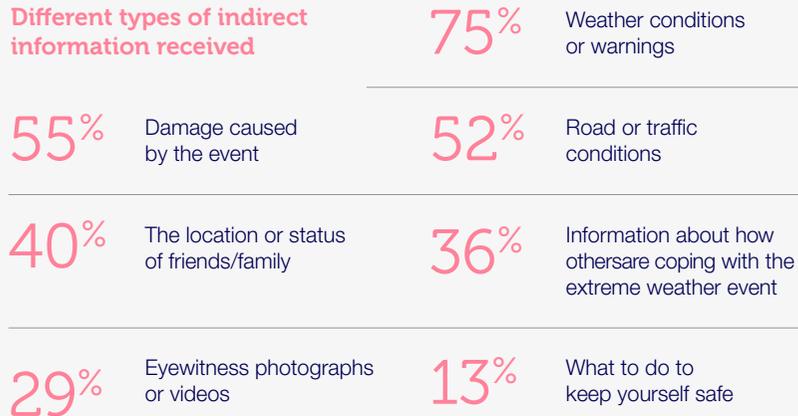


Reported to be active on social media for the same amount of time under both conditions

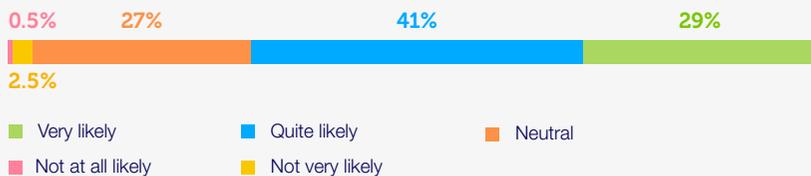
Part B: Findings on how vulnerable persons use social media during emergencies



Different types of indirect information received



Possible action taken based on information received indirectly



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The types of information shared



Attitude towards customized information on social media (Strongly Agree)

