The Elephant in the JIC: The Fundamental Flaw of Emergency Public Information within the NIMS Framework

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Abstract

The National Incident Management System (NIMS) framework is the nationally-accepted model for emergency public information for emergencies and disasters. NIMS mandates that all released public information are approved by the Incident Commander prior to distribution. Unfortunately, this does not accommodate the need and structure of social media outlets which have quickly become an integral component of public communication during an event with emergent information and details. These two communication mechanisms must be reconciled to ensure successful emergency public information during future emergencies or disasters.

KEYWORDS: JIC, NIMS, social media
The National Incident Management System (NIMS) and social media (networking) are quickly becoming two conflicting beasts in the realm of emergency public information. NIMS was built on the foundation of formally organized command, control, and approval of all emergency actions, while social media was built on open, organic, and informal response. Moreover, NIMS is based on best practices and is accepted as the national model for disaster response including public information. Unfortunately, it does not address the impact of social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs which have quickly become commonplace in emergencies and disasters including the Virginia Tech Massacre (2007), San Diego Fires (2007), Mumbai Attacks (2008), and Fargo Flooding (2009). These two entities are fundamentally in conflict and must be reconciled to ensure future emergency public information is efficient and effective.

NIMS calls for all information released to the public during an emergency to be reviewed and approved by the incident commander (or EOC Director in larger events). However, it is already difficult for public information staff to continue to be timely and efficient getting approval for traditional outreach strategies such as television, radio, and print (often online) media considering the time constraints and universal responsibilities of the incident commander during an emergency or disaster.

Unfortunately, as the need to use and monitor social media increases during emergencies, this time challenge is further exacerbated by the intrinsic and demanded brevity of time related to the various forms of social media. Specifically, press releases to traditional media outlets such as television and radio can be adequately handled from creation to approval within a few hours so the media outlets are satisfied. On the other hand, social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook desire information nearly instantaneously with nearly complete transparency. This means social media works in the realm of minutes, not hours like traditional communications. Therefore, it is fairly self-evident that the Incident Commander’s approval of messages and/or information disseminated through social media outlets is extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible. Regardless, social media (like traditional media) must be provided information (aka “fed”) to reduce or minimize the distribution of misinformation related to the emergency or disaster.

This was no more evident than during the 2007 Virginia Tech Massacre. During this event, students inside and around the impacted buildings were providing a steady flow of information related to the incident through Facebook (and other social media sources). The traditional communication streams such as press releases and press conferences were (relatively speaking) slow to react and took several hours to release information related to the event, including the number and names of the student fatalities. This is significant because the
community of Facebook users successfully identified all casualties until the entire formal list was established several hours later. Moreover, the online social networking community never posted a name erroneously\(^1\). And, because of the speed and accuracy of public information via social media, traditional media outlets began to reference social media content rather than wait for the formally released information from the university. That is why some communication experts have stated that social media sources such as Twitter are the new press release\(^2\).

Another challenge for emergency public information within the NIMS framework is the style and structure of released messages. Specifically, the most common form of message distribution is a press release. The message contained within the press release is generally crafted in a very structured way using formalized language and polished contextual placement. They often contain generalized and non-specific quotes from decision-makers or other local authority figures that are intended to personalize and validate the emergency situation.

Unfortunately, this model is wholly contradictory to the expected style of social media. For instance, Twitter only allows posts of 140 characters or less to state “What are you doing?”. Because the question is seeking an informal response, most users are very informal, casual, and brief. Simply trying to explain what twitter is in the last two sentences took 204 characters (including spaces). Facebook adds further complication due to its multi-faceted approach. It adds Twitter-like status updates as well as links to photos, videos, and websites. Within this system, both written and visual context to emergency situations can be distributed via pre-existing, trusted networks. This was evident by the usage of Flickr, Facebook, and other social photo sharing sites during the London Bombings (2005), Hurricane Katrina (2005), Virginia Tech Shootings (2007), Minneapolis I-35 Bridge Collapse (2007), and the Southern California Wildfires (2007)\(^3\). The style and substance of these social media sites is very different than the standard press release. Again, some sort of additional version of the press release for utilization on social networks is vital, but is not currently allowable under the NIMS structure.

Lastly, part of the formalized NIMS structure is to ensure unified messages that support overall incident priorities. This construction is particularly designed to increase the credibility of the message and to increase the public’s ability to validate the released information. The challenge facing emergency public information is that the trustworthiness of governmental communications is often low and is particularly challenged within certain cultural and ethnic sectors of the population. People often seek out trusted friends and family within their own community for new information or to validate received information. Traditionally, this has occurred through conversations between people or testing the information against information reported by traditional media outlets.

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Unfortunately, traditional media outlets get the opportunity to filter the formally approved message, which can result in a biased presentation or further fracture an already challenged message.

Conversely, social networking sites address both of these issues. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are fundamentally built on the foundation of trusted networks and community. Specifically, these social media outlets are established by being “friends” or “fans” of someone or something. As such, the social networks provide a local community an opportunity to validate additionally released messages about the emergency event. Secondly, social media sites allow for direct messaging to the impacted community by cutting out the traditional media and thus their interpretation and presentation. Although social media is not free of bias, one of its core principles is to be self-correcting. These two components are evidence to the potential effectiveness of using social media during an emergency event, at least in support of formalized communications (i.e., press releases).

In conclusion, the application of NIMS guidelines and social media for emergency public information is currently counterproductive. The structured review and approval process greatly reduces the effectiveness of social media. Unfortunately, removing the effectiveness of social media is ultimately detrimental to the overall effectiveness of the emergency public information process. The NIMS process was well vetted, nationally-practiced, and based on best practices. The rise of social media has been quick and fierce, which leaves emergency managers and public information officers in an unenviable and challenging situation.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, under the direction of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) personnel, should immediately move to de-conflict this issue to further ensure effective and efficient emergency public information. This will entail the gathering of local emergency managers, social media experts, senior first responders, and governmental communicators who already apply the foundations of social media within their daily practices. In the meantime, professional advocacy groups such as the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) or the National Emergency Managers Association (NEMA) should seek out paths of advocacy to address this issue quickly and effectively. Expediting this process will ensure that unnecessary challenges are avoided when communicating with the general public during emergencies or disasters.
WORKS CITED


