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THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION WHEN DEALING WITH EMERGENCY SITUATIONS AND DISASTERS

PhD Candidate Andrei Eugen Drăguţ

University of Bucharest/ Bucharest/ Romania

Abstract:

It is a well-known fact that when managing emergency situations and disasters there are many aspects to deal with, one of which is proper and efficient communication. This article stresses the importance of communication both when comes to preparing and dealing with emergency situations and disaster response. Communication can play a major role in making the public aware of possible risks and the need for adequate individual and community preparation, as well it may help inform the public on how to act, what steps everybody should take and what are the safe places after a disaster has struck.

Key words: emergency preparedness, disaster response, disaster relief, emergency management, communication, information

1. Introduction

Emergency management plays an important part of our modern world as disasters are common events in our day and age. This is why emergency management is constantly developing so that communities become better prepared in order to reduce threats and become more resilient in the wake of disasters.

It is known that because disasters pose a threat to communities big or small the need for adequate preparedness and information is vital to increase the effectiveness of response if disaster does strike. This is why communication is important when it comes to preparing and dealing with emergency management.

Emergency communication plays a role in making the public aware of the possible risks and the necessary preparations as well it plays a major part in early warning measures that can help save lives. Individuals in the affected communities can also provide important data that may help create a better picture of the scale of the disasters and their most immediate needs.

2. Communication in emergency situations

Disasters and emergency situations are major challenges that communities face because they are hard to predict, dynamic and their effects are social, economic, environmental and psychological in nature. This is why communication plays a major role in all four phases of disaster management, namely mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery.[1]

Communication is an essential part of emergency management both before and during such an event. The role of communication before an emergency situation is to

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provide information about the possible risks and disasters and the necessary steps needed to prepare if disaster do take place. Emergency communication also provides information about the places where those affected can receive help, where to find family and friends, and information about the necessary steps to be as safe as possible during the specific situation.

In time of emergency communication is used to coordinate the efforts of those involved in the preparation and response efforts and it connects affected people, families and communities with first responders and support systems.

To ensure efficient communication during emergency situations plans on how to communicate and those responsible with disseminating messages to the public should be in place, as well as the necessary technical means that can be operational and have the ability to facilitate communication.

Emergency communication between the different actors involved in preparation, response and recovery processes can help make the picture clearer by knowing the capabilities of each party and their role during preparation or response efforts.

A disaster is defined by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction as “a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.”[2]

Emergency situation is defined as an “exceptional event, nonmilitary nature, that by scale and intensity threatens the lives and health of the population, environment, important materials and cultural values and to restore normality are necessary measures and urgent action, the allocation of additional resources and unified management of forces and means involved.”[3]

Practitioners and experts in the field have used various synonyms for disasters such as “calamity”, “catastrophe”, “emergency” and “crises” when it comes to naming events that affect the socioeconomic and environmental system abruptly by causing the loss of life and property.[4]

A major role in assuring the exchange of information from the authorities to the population is played by the traditional media that can help ensure useful messages reach the public. Although traditionally authorities are the ones providing information in emergency situations we are seeing in recent years an increase of information provided by the public with social media and other means.

Emergency communication is constantly evolving because of the lessons from past experiences and the emergence of new technologies that not only increases the number of people that have access but also the quantity of available information.

The importance of emergency communication and the need for adequate planning of such an essential part of emergency management was understood in Romania this is why in 2008 the government approved the National Strategy for Communication and Public Information for Emergency Situations.[5]

2.1 The increasing role of communities and new communication technology

There are many ways in which emergency preparedness can evolve and help make communities more involved in reducing threats and being able to resist if disasters do occur.

When it comes to supplementing government capabilities companies, NGO's and faith-based organizations can play a major role in preparedness and response as these kinds of organizations could train, inform and prepare communities at a more personal level. We also have to acknowledge the fact that community engagement is difficult

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because those in charge of emergency management have to be able to organize and coordinate professionals, volunteers and affected populations. This is why communication plays a major role in organizing groups of people with different backgrounds and experience and making them capable of working together for the common goal of response and recovery.

Private companies and NGO's can also help in disaster response, recovery and relief depending on their own field of expertise or business line. A Romanian example of this is that immediately after the Colectiv Club disaster over 43 private companies and NGO's offered assistance ranging from free accommodation for the victims relatives to medical care, food and beverages, transportation, funeral services, communication and legal counseling.[6]

The role of communication has been part of disaster management for a long time, but new technologies are increasing the possibilities of integrating different communication systems in the mitigation and prevention of disasters.[7]

Smartphones today have the ability to provide location information that can help response teams, family or friends locate people. The location function on phones can also provide information on the closest place where someone can receive help and the kind of help provided in that specific place.

Disaster response is also changing because of social media giants such as Facebook, Google and Twitter that have developed means through which they help make it easier to access different types of information.

Features such as Safety Check from Facebook, Google Person Finder and others can help take some pressure off from traditional communication infrastructure and help individuals get in touch with family and friends.

The existence of modern ways of communication such as mobile phones, SMS, Internet and social media can help prepare, alert and deal with disasters, but we must also consider the steps needed to analyze the huge amounts of new data and see which of that useful information is and, which irrelevant, conflicting or false data is.

Use of new media and smartphones can help get information directly from people in the affected communities in that area, but as with almost all things these new technologies can also have negative effects if the information is irrelevant, conflicting or false.

In Romania after the Colectiv Club tragedy there were different contradictory information and theories that were circulating in social media and the Romanian blogosphere. A Romanian journalist identified five conspiracy theories circulating online that spread like wildfire.[8]

A possible problem in analyzing the data from the public could be that the amount of data exceeds the ability to analyze it fast enough by emergency management organizations especially if we acknowledge that during emergency situations some decisions must be swift.

When it comes to the ability to analyze the information available on social media it can vary greatly depending on the kind of disaster and its speed. This is why those in charge of creating communication plans for disaster response should take into account the need to find ways to gather and manage that information and its use as efficiently as possible. A possible solution could be developing departments that analyze information provided on social media and doing simulations to help learn how to use that information and how to discern the good from the bad. If the establishment of such departments is not possible another way to check the information received from individuals or from social

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media is cross-referencing it by getting people, NGO's and companies from the affected area involved to confirm or deny the accuracy of the information available.

Emergency management communication should be adjusted to community needs this is why it should consider the multiple types of disasters and multiple cultural, political and religious differences to provide optimal response. Such an adjustment could be the facilitation of information in multiple languages especially in those areas with ethnic minorities because it could help the affected people understand easier and feel more relaxed that their needs are looked after. Another thing to keep in mind is that each community has its particularities and when it comes to direct communication, assistance from some local members could increase the effectiveness of how the messages are received.

For example in some communities it may be a good idea to use the church or other faith based organization leaders to help spread the necessary information and keep the population as calm as possible. When it comes to sharing information with the public it should be done by using those means and Medias that the biggest number of people have access and are most familiar within that community. For example in some communities informing the population through Internet may not be feasible, but doing it with TV, radio or SMS could work.

The implementation of an emergency alert and information system that sends text messages to mobile phones during disasters or other events could work extremely well in Romania due to the many mobile phone users even among the older citizens. Such emergency alert systems are working in the United States of America where it is used to send messages to mobile phones in the case of terrorist attack, natural disaster or other serious disasters.[9] Australia has a national telephone warning system that is used by their emergency services to send voice messages to landlines and text messages to mobile phones in the area in a likely or actual emergency.[10]

This kind of messaging systems could also be used to send targeted messages to specific organizations based on their location, capabilities, and area of expertise. For example if such a system existed in Romania and volunteers with medical expertise would be needed because of an emergency then it could be used to send messages to members of the Romanian College of Physicians and members of the Order of Nurses, midwives and Medical Assistants in Romania with information on how to volunteer if inclined. Other targeted messages could be sent to police officers, firefighters, companies or NGO's to inform their staff and volunteers. Social media could also be used to send targeted information to certain groups or people in specific geographical areas. This is why targeted messaging systems could greatly increase the response and recovery capabilities by keeping the public informed and by supplementing public forces with volunteers.

3. Conclusion

Emergency management has a special place in modern societies as it deals with assessing threats, preparing communities and developing ways to increase their resiliency in the wake of disasters. Emergency communication has an important role in emergency management as it helps inform, prepare and coordinate the response and relief efforts.

Because communication in disaster response has such an important role it should be constantly improved by integrating new technologies that increase the amount of data and make it more efficient, accurate and available. Using new technologies is not the only

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way by which communication during emergency situations can be improved; an important component is getting the public more involved.

This is why preparing communities and getting local organizations and individuals engaged can make them more resilient by making sure everyone can understand the possible risks and emergencies and help them develop plans.

Constantly informing the public and doing simulations on a regular basis can help communities understand what each emergency message means and how everyone should act according to them. Doing simulations is useful because the public will know how to act when real emergency messages are sent by the emergency services.

Developing short guides on how to inform the emergency services of a crisis, the effects that a disaster had in specific location and the immediate needs could also ease the cooperation among affected individuals and responders. Smartphone apps that send predefined information such as location and the type of problem in the immediate vicinity of that device directly to the emergency services could also help.

This is why new technologies and community involvement could lead to safer lives and more resilient societies.

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