



Australian Government
Australian Civil-Military Centre



THE UNIVERSITY
of **ADELAIDE**

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

A Rapid Guide

The Communication and Complex Emergencies Project

The Communication and Complex Emergencies Project is a multi-phase collaboration between the University of Adelaide's Applied Communication Collaborative Research Unit (ACCRU) and the Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC). The current phase of the project focuses on a range of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and digital platforms and their role in supporting emergency and humanitarian relief and assistance processes during complex emergencies.

About the Australian Civil-Military Centre (ACMC)

The Australian Civil-Military Centre (formerly the Asia Pacific Civil-Military Centre of Excellence) was established in November 2008, in recognition of the growing importance of civil-military interaction and is evidence of Australia's commitment to sustainable peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. The Centre's mission is to support the development of national civil-military capabilities to prevent, prepare for and respond more effectively to conflicts and disasters overseas. At its core is a multi-agency approach, with staff from a number of Australian Government departments and agencies, the New Zealand Government and the non-government organisation (NGO) sector. Applying this collaborative approach to working with other government agencies, the United Nations and other relevant stakeholders, the Centre seeks to improve civil-military education and training, and develop civil-military doctrine and guiding principles. Through its research program, the Centre seeks to identify best practice responses to key lessons learned - important for developing doctrine and facilitating training programs - to contribute directly to the ability of the Australian Government to develop a more effective civil-military capacity for conflict prevention and disaster management overseas. For more information contact:

E-mail: research@acmc.gov.au

Web: <http://www.acmc.gov.au>

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Australian Civil-Military Centre or the Australian Government. This paper is published under a Creative Commons license, see <http://creativecommons.org.au/learn-more/licences/version3>. All parts of this publication may be reproduced, stored in retrieval systems, and transmitted by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 978-1-921933-25-7

Published May 2019

About the Author

This paper was researched and written by Professor Andrew Skuse of the Applied Communication Collaborative Research Unit (ACCRU), University of Adelaide. He is Head of the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Adelaide and his work focuses on how low-income populations interact with information resources and how these resources affect areas such as livelihoods, health, education, peace-building and social equity. Professor Skuse has undertaken research and consultancy on communication for development (C4D) in the developing world for a wide range of international development agencies, including ADB, AusAID, DFID, EU, UNICEF and WHO. For more information contact:

E-mail: andrew.skuse@adelaide.edu.au

Web: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/accru/>

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge Paul McAllister, Anuradha Mundkur, Caitlyn McKenzie, Celia Hevesi, Ivan Kovacic, Zoe Moses, Colonel Jim Burns and Michelle Lovi of ACMC who provided research support and critical feedback during the development of the outputs. In addition, I would like to thank Lieutenant Colonel Jason Logue of the Australian Defence Force, Roger Lye of the Australian Government Crisis Management Branch and Darren Cutrupi of the ACT Emergency Services Agency, all of whom provided valuable insights into the role of new ICTs in emergencies.

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

1. Introduction

1.1 This guidance paper examines the use of social media during complex emergencies. Globally, social media use occurs on a massive scale. In 2017 there are close to 2 billion Facebook, 1.3 billion YouTube, 600 million Instagram, 467 million LinkedIn, 375 million Google+, 313 million Twitter and 166 million Snapchat users. While social media use is extensive in the developed world, it is also rapidly extending to developing world contexts as cost barriers to accessing Internet-capable mobile telecommunications are steadily lowered. The role that social media can play in complex emergencies is significant, accordingly this guidance paper:

- Examines the broad relevance of social media to complex emergencies;
- Addresses the strengths and weaknesses of social media as channels of emergency communication;
- Provides a series of ‘top-tips’ of relevance to humanitarian and emergency workers;
- Identifies the organizational importance of building a comprehensive social media policy;
- Explores a range of key principles associated with developing effective social media initiatives; and
- Provides further resources and links that enable wider exploration of the topic.

2. Using Social Media in Complex Emergencies: strengths and weaknesses




2.1 Social media use is a routine and everyday occurrence for many people across the globe. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have changed the way ordinary people communicate with each other, with their friends, relatives and peers, with groups that have similar interests, as well as with organisations that utilise social media, i.e. governments, humanitarian organisations and community organisations. Unlike traditional media such as radio or television, which is vertical and one way, social media platforms allow for real time ‘horizontal’ communication to occur in an open and democratic way. Anyone with access to a social media account and Internet connectivity can post an extremely wide range of content from simple text-based comments and conversations, to audio and video material covering a wide array of themes and issues.

2.2 In the context of complex emergencies social media is of particular importance because it

allows for a real-time dialogue to occur with affected communities who may be experiencing significant hardships and exposure to risk. Social media platforms also extend the potential for organisations working in humanitarian and complex emergencies to gather information and therein enhance situational awareness. Social media can play a critical role in helping organisations to keep their own staff aware of a situation, as well as provide a platform through which staff can interact and share lessons learned. Most importantly, social media presents such organisations with an opportunity to communicate with disaster-affected populations about impending and immediate risks, and the actions they need to take to offset them. In this respect, social media can play an important role in raising awareness and in changing behaviour. Equally, social media provides an autonomous platform for peers to communicate with each other about unfolding events, and a means to support each other before, during and after an event.

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

Figure 1: The most popular social media platforms

Social Media Platform	Description	Emergency Application
	<p>Facebook is a social media platform that allows users or 'friends' to connect with each other through dedicated and personalised 'pages'. It has a wide range of functions including news feeds, status updates, e-mail, real-time chatting and media sharing.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enables users to post about their status, if they are affected or safe; 2. Has one-button 'I'm safe' functionality; 3. Enables real-time dialogue; 4. Because 'sharing' is a key function of Facebook, useful information can be shared widely across numerous networks.
	<p>Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging site that enables users to network with others and receive 'tweets' of up to 140 characters in length. The platform is used extensively to exchange short messages and news updates in real time. It is good for pointing users to more in-depth material, i.e. websites. The information in tweets is organised via hashtags (#), i.e. #earthquake, which are searchable.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Real-time communication gets important information to users immediately; 2. Tweets are short and simple to read and are good for advocating action; 3. Tweets have the ability to be 'mined' for data to help organisations build situational awareness; 4. Can generate a dialogue that is clear and concise, due to the character limitations on tweets.
	<p>YouTube allows registered users to upload and share video content with anyone who has access to the YouTube platform. Individuals, groups, organisations and governments may upload content. Billions of videos can be found on YouTube and links to videos can be shared to networks via Tweets. YouTube allows users to comment on videos and engage in a dialogue about the content.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enables individuals to upload video footage of key events, emergency conditions, rights abuses and recovery activities that help raise awareness of critical situations or recovery; 2. YouTube is easily searchable through keywords, but requires quite specific searches to access relevant content, i.e. 'Nepal earthquake 2015' versus 'earthquake'; 3. YouTube uploads can take up a lot of bandwidth and in contexts where there is poor Internet/3G connectivity this can be problematic.

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

2.3 Social media democratises communication to the extent that citizens are now empowered - often via powerful multimedia capable smartphones - with the means to capture a wide range of content from audio, images and video. This content can be used to inform or support a range of important processes that help underpin humanitarian assistance, conflict reduction and peace building activities. Social media has become an important platform for witnessing and citizen journalism, specifically of human rights abuses, electoral and peace monitoring, and for wider networking and building communities of interest.¹ It has also become central to rapid-onset emergencies with the platforms supporting a wide range of emergency functions from short-term event specific 'pages' promoted by emergency support organisations and affected communities to functions that let friends and relatives know a person is 'safe', such as Facebook's safety check function.

Figure 2: Facebook's Safety Check Function



2.4 While social media platforms have great potential, it is important to recognise that the distribution of access to Internet-capable mobile phones is not equal, especially in the developing world. Digital divides still exist between rich and poor and it is important to remember that social media is just one of many potential communication channels that might be available, including face-to-face and peer communication, radio, print, television, film, theatre and SMS. Multi-channel communications providing consistent and accurate messages have the greatest impact in emergencies.

3.5 The following strengths and weaknesses are associated with the use of social media during emergencies:

Strengths:

- Quick and easy to set up and relatively cheap to use;
- Appeals to youth and young adults in particular;
- Can extend the reach of emergency communication activities to new audiences;
- Can provide real time communication to a wide range of communities or groups in a variety of formats;
- Useful medium for communicating official warning or emergency messages;
- Helps reduce exclusive reliance on traditional mass media such as print, radio or television;

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

- Allows users to engage in dialogue and communicate needs and opinions;
- Allows engagement with communities of users who are experiencing a specific problem or issue, i.e. flooding, conflict;
- Enables vulnerable populations to communicate with a community of peers experiencing similar problems;
- Can help to counter inaccurate information and rumours circulating within a specific context; and
- The dialogue it can foster helps increase situational awareness for the public, as well as emergency and humanitarian organisations.

Weaknesses:

- Requires infrastructure, electricity and access to computer or Internet-capable mobile phones;
- Requires literacy;
- Requires e-literacy;
- Can be used negatively to promote abuse, hate and rumours that may affect the delivery of emergency assistance;
- Requires significant moderation if posts are to be monitored for offensive or harmful content;
- Can be very time-consuming to assess social media for useful information that may positively impact situational awareness; and
- User generated social media content can vary significantly in quality, reliability and veracity.

3. 'Top tips' for engaging with Social Media in Emergencies

3.1 If considering engaging with **social media** as part of an emergency response the following 'top tips' will help identify some of the most important things to consider to ensure success:

Before the Emergency

1. If utilising social media, it is important to know the audience and be flexible. Emergency communication requires good preparation, having an understanding of the audience and integrating adaptive capacity into the social media approach if it is to be responsive to

the shifting dynamics of the emergency and the issues with which social media users are concerned.

2. While social media platforms are useful during emergencies, they are also important channels for communication, community building and for community organisation before an emergency occurs, i.e. in the preparedness phase, as well as in the post-emergency period when concern has turned to recovery. Social media platforms can play an important role in stirring community participation and action in a wide range of areas of relevance to emergencies, risk reduction, reconstruction, conflict prevention, disarmament, peace-building and reconciliation.²
3. Increased access to Internet-capable mobile telecommunications is leading to rapid growth in social media use in the developed and developing world. Prior to an emergency, working to ensure that essential infrastructure such as telecommunications is robust enough to cope with emergencies or can be repaired quickly to get communities back on-line is an essential component of preparedness and recovery. The market has worked steadily to lower cost barriers for social media users through cheap access to mobile telecommunications networks. Supporting the development of pro-poor telecommunications access can also help to lessen digital divide constraints

During the Emergency

1. Social media relies on engagement to be effective. It is a 'social' medium. Using social media as a platform for 'broadcasting' one-way messages or announcements is unlikely to be effective without engaging in some form of supporting dialogue or interaction with affected communities.
2. When entering the field of social media engagement for the first time it is useful to start small, perhaps with a highly targeted intervention, and learn from the experience. Determine what lessons can inform future engagement.

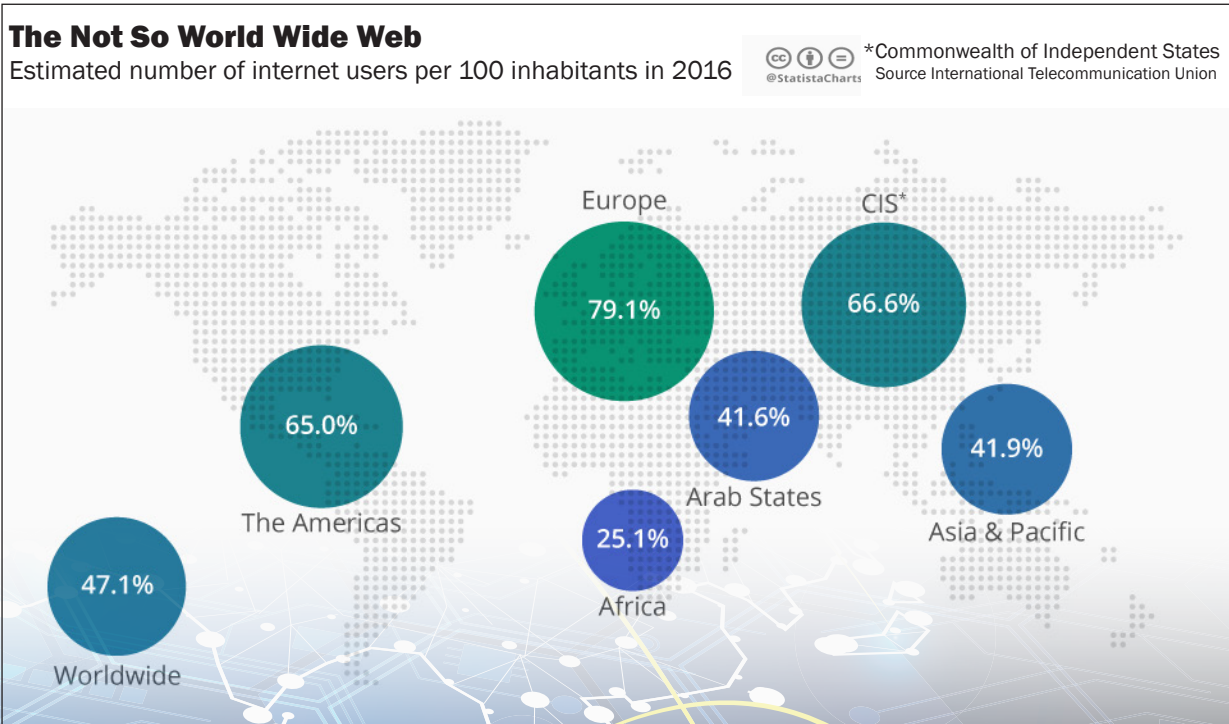
Social Media in Complex Emergencies

- Engaging in social media may increase 'listening capacity' and the ability to gather insights from communities affected by complex emergencies. Because social media creates a dialogue it is possible to 'do and learn' at the same time. Through social media it is evident if messages and dialogue are making a difference, if there are any problems and if messages create distortions in understanding or promote rumours.³ Engagement with social media users through evaluation mechanisms can help identify problems and rectify them as communication work moves forward.
- It is worth remembering that social media 'voices' may not be representative of wider society. Affluent members of society may contribute more posts or media content if there is a significant digital divide between rich and poor, men and women, literate and illiterate. This may skew situational awareness and therefore service delivery in areas and populations who are in less need than others. Because of this, it is important to not rely on social media alone for either raising awareness or generating situational

awareness. Additionally, poorer and lower-educated populations may have less literacy and e-literacy capabilities, which further limits social media access, especially in the developing world (see Figure 3 below). Social media may constitute just one of many potential communication and data acquisition channels available. If an approach is holistic it will have more of an impact and create a better understanding of the situation.

- Care needs to be taken to protect contributors if your organisation is engaging in social media activity and is relying on users to post sensitive information or media content that speaks to situational awareness or to an issue such as human rights abuses. Because social media use can be traced easily, ensuring user anonymity for those supplying sensitive material is important. Consider if social media is the best platform in such instances and what level of protection various platforms afford to their users. If it is decided that there are genuine risks for the engaged communities, then an alternative form of information collection or dissemination may be preferable, i.e. face-to-face or via encrypted e-mails.

Figure 3: The Global Digital Divide



Social Media in Complex Emergencies

6. The quantity of social media content is significant and in some instances can be overwhelming. Pages may be flooded with posts, and organisations seeking to utilise social media to build situational awareness may be faced with problems concerning where the information has come from, who has posted it, whether it is accurate and verified or whether it is misinformation. The quality of social media content can often be low and inaccurate. Having in place means to verify information is important, i.e. through locally situated emergency workers who can verify that a specific emergency is unfolding in a specific place. Verification can help defuse rumours that may negatively affect overall communication efforts.

After the Emergency

1. Learning from initial social media practice will help to understand the scale of human and financial resources required to build a more comprehensive social media approach and presence. Be prepared to ask for help from organisations of experts with more experience in the social media field if your organisation intends to increase its' technical capacity.
2. It is useful to revisit the social media strategy and policy after engaging in an emergency. Reflecting on lesson learned may lead to changes in both strategy and policy that need to be implemented.

4. Social Media Policy Considerations

4.1 Effective social media work is often framed by organisation policies that centre on its use. Social media policies and protocols define who will be responsible for your organisation's social media work, i.e. information or media officers, as well as what rules are associated with social media use. Policies and protocols will help define the quality of the social media practice, and consider risk, the legal ramifications of misuse and how to deal with negative public engagement. Key organisational social media policy and protocol considerations include:

- **Effective policies emerge from good teamwork:** The development of an organizational social media policy should be

a collective effort. Ensure that all staff with a stake in the communication work are involved from Head of Mission to Information Officers and the numerous roles in between.

- Build a learning culture that is creative and adaptive: A social media policy should target the creation of an organizational culture that is learning oriented and adaptive. Defining who is on the social media team, how regularly to meet, how to learn from practice, the challenges faced and how to make changes to practice is critical to building a culture that is responsive to the communities with whom your organisation engages.
- **Social media policies should have a broad focus and be principle-based:** Examine staff roles and responsibilities, what can and cannot be done from a legal or branding perspective and why it is being done, i.e. what principles will be adopted. Principles might include targeting specific 'at risk' communities, developing clear and concise materials and messages, learning through evaluation, committing to meaningful dialogue with audiences and feeding back the learning to communities to increase accountability.
- **Build organizational capacity through training:** Understanding how to use social media and avoid some of the risks associated with the medium is important to the sustainability of any specific strategy that may be developed. Training in appropriate social media cyber-behaviour and cyber-safety can help protect staff when engaging in a wide range of social media practice, i.e. from professional to personal. In addition, building the competencies of media or communications staff to engage effectively in social media is critical. Social media communication can inform and stimulate dialogue, so understanding the key principles associated with effective communication in emergencies can help staff to become more effective communicators.
- **Review and refresh:** Social media is an extremely fast moving field. Because of this it is wise to regularly revisit the social media

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

policy to ensure it stays relevant and up to date. If there is a culture of learning firmly embedded within your organization it will be easy to identify issues that require further policy consideration. Policy should be a living rather than static resource.

5. Key Principles for Designing a Social Media Strategy

5.1 Engaging in social media requires a significant amount of preparation. A clearly defined set of policies, procedures and practices need to be considered and put in place if social media work is to be effective and sustainable. The following principles will help identify some of the key issues to consider when developing a social media engagement strategy:

- **How to use social media.** Social media can be used to: (i) communicate important information to affected communities; (ii) link communities to useful resources or services; (iii) monitor public social media activity in order to increase situational awareness of emerging events; and (iv) support staff to exchange experiences and lessons learned. Consider the specific approach to employ. Will it be comprehensive and take account of all phases of an emergency from preparedness to recovery, or will it focus exclusively on acute events? Will it target specific 'publics' or interest groups? There are clear human and financial resource questions associated with the type and duration of engagement that is sought through social media.
- **Ensure that the necessary human and financial resources are in place** to develop and implement the social media strategy. Appropriately trained social media staff, as well as funding to develop content, undertake evaluation and effective inter-organisation coordination are all critical to success.
- **Appropriate planning and preparation** will enable a quick rollout of social media work. Previous experience of working in

emergencies will provide an idea of what worked in the past and what did not work. Engaging in formative research with target audiences or 'publics' will help to better understand their information needs. Any existing messages or content can be used or adapted. Previous versions of social media sites that have been used before may need to be reactivated or a temporary Internet 'splash-page' may need to be activated that over-rides your organisation's Internet home page with information about an unfolding emergency. This page can point users to other credible sources of information or to your own organisation's social media pages. Remember, different audiences have different needs. Some audiences want information, some want dialogue and some want both. The multiple communication channels used should reinforce each other and 'point' to each other, i.e. Twitter is useful for pointing to sources that contain more information such as websites.

- **Setting objectives and specific outcomes** for social media engagement will help to assess if the work has been successful or has missed the mark.
- **Working with partners for enhanced cooperation and coordination** will increase situational awareness of the emergency and ensure that key messages and dialogue promoted through social media are consistent with other organisations.
- Understanding which groups your organisation is trying to reach with social media work is important to creating impact. Social media content and dialogue may target specific communities who are at risk, the wider public or specific interest groups such as emergency workers or influencers. When engaging social media communities, try to build on what people already know about emergencies and recognize their strengths and desire to protect and rebuild their communities.

Social Media in Complex Emergencies

- **Identifying specific content to communicate, dialogue to create or information required** will help to sharpen the strategy. Also consider if your organisation's work will cover all phases of an emergency from before the emergency, to during it and afterwards.
- **Undertaking monitoring and evaluation (M&E)** of your social media work will help determine if the messaging has had the desired impact. M&E results will tell show if the messaging reached the target groups, what went well, what went wrong and what might be changed in future. M&E helps to learn lessons that inform future implementation, and the social media policy and protocols.

6. Key Resources

6.1 The following resources can provide more extensive information on the use of social media during emergencies and on developing a comprehensive social media strategy:

The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) - Smart Tips for Category 1 Responders Using Social Media in Emergency Management (2012)

This quick and easy guide identifies how best to utilise key social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter during emergencies. Information is presented in graphical format and details different approaches for effective community engagement.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85946/Using-social-media-in-emergencies-smart-tips.pdf

Local Government Association of South Australia - Managing Social Media During Emergencies Guide (2016)

This resource examines how social media can be used during an emergency, how organisations can prepare for a crisis, what they should do during a crisis and after. It provides some useful information on developing a social media strategy and creating a website splash-page for use in emergencies.

https://www.lga.sa.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/2016_LGA_SocialMediaDuringEmergencies_Guide_V4.pdf

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control - Social Media Strategy Development (2016)

This document provides a comprehensive overview of how to create a social media strategy, and a series of tips for using popular platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and LinkedIn.

<http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/social-media-strategy-guide-for-public-health-communication.pdf>

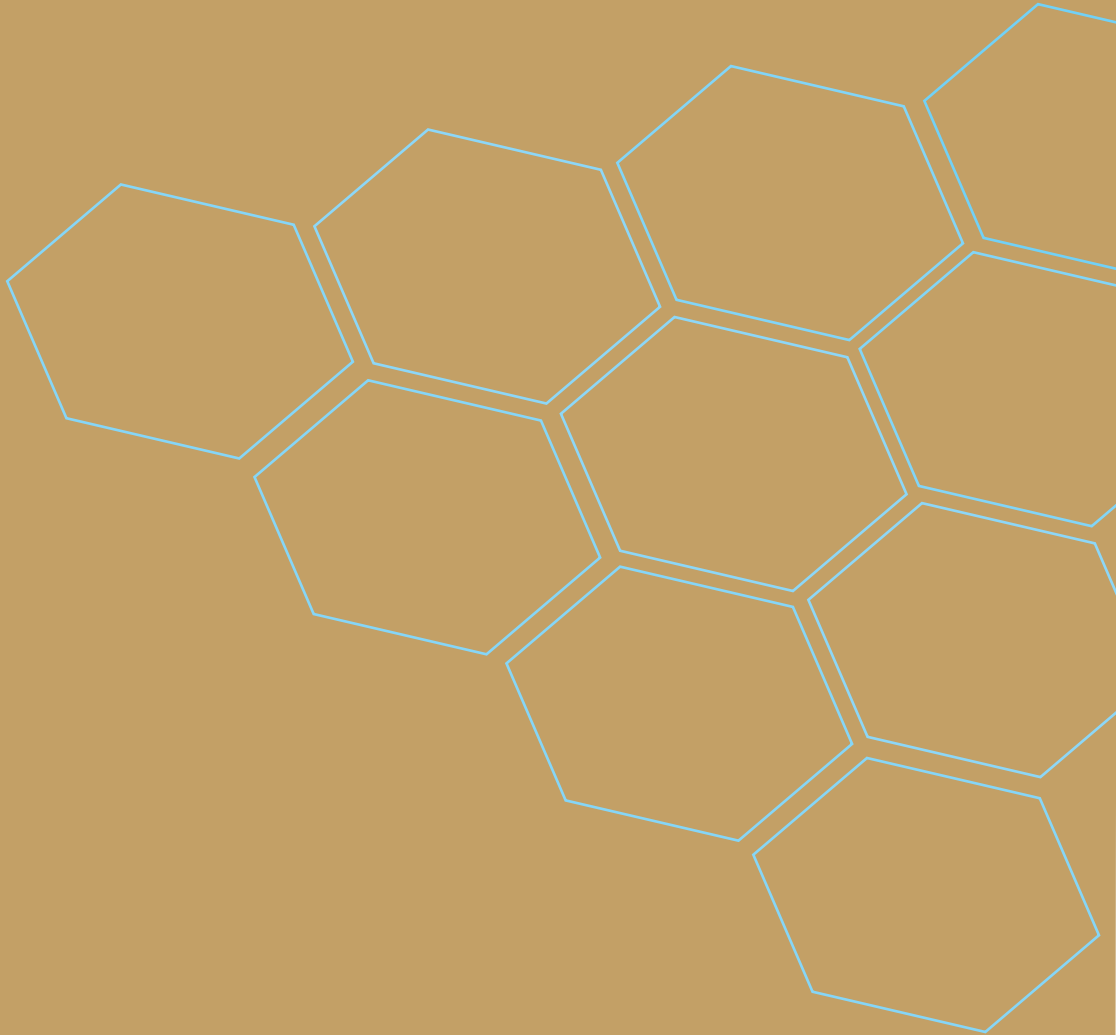
The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) - Social Media in Emergencies: Guidelines for Communication and Public Advocacy (2012)

This comprehensive guide examines the use of social media in emergencies and explores how such channels can be used to link to a wide variety of groups from other emergency organisations, to the public, to journalists and to influencers (for advocacy). The guide gives practical advice on how best to utilise some of the most popular social media platforms.

<http://www.unicef emergencies.com/downloads/eresource/docs/3.1%20Media%20and%20Communications/socialmediainemergencies-communicationsguidelines-120518144234-phpapp02.pdf>

REFERENCES

1. Comninos, A. (2011) Twitter Revolutions and Cyber Crackdowns: User-generated content and social networking in the Arab Spring and beyond. Association for Progressive Communications (APC), Melville, South Africa.
2. Borges, M. and Vivacqua, A. (2012) 'Taking advantage of collective knowledge in emergency response systems'. Journal of Network and Computer Applications, 35(1): 189-198.
3. BBC Media Action. (2012) Still left in the dark? How people in emergencies use communication to survive - and how humanitarian agencies can help. Policy Briefing No. 6, BBC Media Action, London.



Australian Government
Australian Civil-Military Centre



THE UNIVERSITY
of ADELAIDE