

## Title

Disaster Response in a Connected World

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## Abstract

The increased availability of mobile Internet access around the world is connecting people, organizations and communities like never before. In addition to changing lives and relationships, it also has a significant impact on how information flows in the case of natural disasters. Whereas in the past formal disaster response organizations and authorities had a natural information monopoly, today many people affected by disasters have access to information at the same time or faster than professional responders.

Of course, information infrastructure is not evenly distributed. Currently these changes are more visible in high income countries than in developing countries. But that is changing. According to a 2014 report by the GSM Alliance, “the developing world overtook the developed world in terms of smartphone connections in 2011 and today accounts for two in every three smartphones on the planet... By 2020, four out of every five smartphone connections worldwide will come from the developing world.”<sup>i</sup> Even people who do not have smartphones increasingly do have access to social networks. Both Twitter and Facebook have launched initiatives that allow users to access their services either via SMS<sup>ii</sup> or through a stripped-down, text-only version that is available for free on feature phones in many countries.<sup>iii iv</sup>

Since actionable information is one of the first things that survivors look for in an emergency, this increased access to relevant information changes the relationship between disaster responders and the affected population. This makes crowd-based and mobile information systems such as social media both disruptive and transformative.

They are disruptive to the existing response and communication systems because they undermine traditional hierarchies, if these are not able or willing to address the changed information needs of the population. Following the 2011 Japanese earthquake, “individual users tended to rely more on sites providing peer-generated content – for example, video/photo-sharing sites, blogs, and online communities – than on news channels. This indicates that in this era of social media, individuals not only prefer peer-to-peer communication for recovering from a crisis but also rely more on peer-generated resources than on traditional and official information resources.”<sup>v</sup>

These technologies are transformative because they empower affected people by putting tools at their fingertips that can provide them with similar amounts and quality of data that were previously only available to official disaster response organizations. By leveling the information playing field,

social media puts individuals and communities in a position where they can make better decisions for themselves and also better challenge decisions made by others.

Unfortunately, some information shared through social networks is misleading. For example, at the beginning of the 2014 Ebola crisis in Nigeria, a hoax went viral online that claimed that Ebola could be prevented by drinking and bathing in salt water. As a result, two people died and at least 20 were hospitalized.<sup>vi</sup> This example shows that national and international disaster responders have an important role to play to counter incorrect information.

At the same time social media users can significantly increase situational awareness through crowd sourced incident reporting systems, verification mechanisms and online crisis mapping, all of which benefit significantly from the involvement of the affected population.

All of this has significant implications for both national and international response authorities. They not only must be more transparent and responsive to satisfy expectations of affected people, but they must also radically change their approach to communication. Currently, many organizations view networked communications tools such as social media mainly as a channel to connect with donors in high income countries.<sup>vii</sup> Going forward, disaster responders need to view these technologies as means to mobilize virtual volunteers, improve their understanding of the crisis and, most critically, to include affected people as active and influential participants in the response.

## Author's Biography

Timo Luege worked as a journalist for nearly 10 years before joining the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) as a Senior Communications Officer. At the IFRC he was responsible for the organization's website and launched the IFRC's social media activities. He then joined the International Committee of the Red Cross as a Protection Delegate before starting his own consultancy company called "[Social Media for Good.](#)" Today his clients include the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement, UN agencies and NGOs. His field missions include deployments to Haiti, Liberia, the Philippines and Myanmar.

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<sup>iii</sup> Fast and Free Facebook Mobile Access with 0.facebook.com

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<sup>iv</sup> Facebook's plan to find its next billion users: convince them the internet and Facebook are the same

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<sup>v</sup> Seong Eun Cho, Kyujin Jung and Han Woo Park. "Social media use during Japan's 2011 earthquake: How Twitter transforms the locus of crisis communication" Media International Australia; No. 149 November 2013

<sup>vi</sup> Nigerian Ebola Hoax Results in Two Deaths; <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/nigerian-ebola-hoax-results-deaths/story?id=25842191>

<sup>vii</sup> Alexandra Olteanu, Sarah Vieweg, and Carlos Castillo. "What to Expect When the Unexpected Happens: Social Media Communications Across Crises" Proceedings of CSCW 2015 (2015).