

Study suggests 'connectivity' via the Internet is vital for communities experiencing a crisis

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A recent study conducted by researchers at Louisiana State University and Southeastern Louisiana University demonstrates that the Internet has the capacity to sustain a geographic community in a crisis situation as much as any other communication tool and should become a standard piece of crisis preparedness, especially during evacuation.

Steve Procopio, director of LSU's Public Policy Research Lab, and Claire Procopio, SLU assistant professor of communication, found that Internet users in a crisis situation use the Internet to seek out interactive forums specific to their neighborhoods; activate weak ties in their social networks; and engage in more uncertainty reduction behaviors when experiencing higher degrees of damage. They also found that people in crisis turn to the Internet in place of other media, in part due to disruptions to other media caused by the crisis.

Another highlight of the study is that while both women and men engaged in information-seeking and emotional support activities after the hurricane, women placed more value on expressive communication than men.

The study is based on a 36-item Web survey that was posted on the Times-Picayune's Web site, www.nola.com, and on the Web pages of seven schools in the Hurricane Katrina affected area. A total of 1,192 Internet users completed the survey that was available from Oct. 20 to Dec. 23, 2005.

Specific results of the survey show:

- * Seventy-four percent of respondents said they visited online forums specific to their neighborhoods, while 54 percent posted to these forums.
- * Nearly half, 46 percent, of respondents used the Internet to contact people they had not contacted in more than a year.
- * Fifty-six percent of Internet users from the most heavily damaged areas said they overwhelmingly preferred local news outlets to other Internet sites or national news sources, while 29.7 percent thought that information from other citizens was the most informative.
- * Twenty-eight percent said they increased their use of the Internet as phone lines failed. Of those who used dial-up connections to connect to the Internet, 20 percent found it more difficult to check their e-mail due to the overloaded phone system.

“This study demonstrates that the Internet has the capacity to sustain a geographic community as much as any other communication tool. Agencies like FEMA, the Be Ready Campaign, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other emergency agencies should integrate into all their preparedness literature advice on bringing one’s laptop and accessing the Internet in public places like libraries,” Steve Procopio said.

The report also recommends that evacuation shelters should be prepared to offer Internet access to evacuees, and that online forums be quickly established to help locate missing persons and search for meeting places online in the days following a crisis.

“Traditional news outlets should also be prepared to set up localized interactive forums and discussion threads, much like The Times-Picayune’s NOLA.com did,” Claire Procopio said. “By providing this organizational structure they enabled Internet users to communicate their messages to specific audiences and to find specific communication to

reduce their uncertainty about places left behind.”

The sample population consisted only of those individuals who were already Internet users and should not be interpreted as representative of the entire pre-Katrina greater New Orleans area population. Therefore, the study attempts to measure the activity of those who are Internet users, not to examine the whole community. Respondents were also directed to complete the survey only if they had been a resident of the greater New Orleans metropolitan area prior to the storm. Zip codes were solicited as a secondary check on residence.

The survey was conducted through LSU’s Public Policy Research Lab, where Steve Procopio serves as director. LSU’s Public Policy Research Lab is a partnership between the Manship School of Mass Communication’s Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs and the E. J. Ourso College of Business.

Source: Louisiana State University

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