

# Emergency online communities

March 4 2010

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Online social networks could help with communications and recovery for people with disabilities following major natural disasters, or even terrorist attack, according to a research paper in the *International Journal of Emergency Management*.

In the wake of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, other [natural disasters](#), and even technological emergencies it has become obvious that there is a serious need for disaster and [emergency preparedness](#) for people with disabilities. Following Katrina and Rita there was inadequate access to medical equipment, medicines, accessible communication media, assistive technologies, personal assistance, and even shelter.

The aftermath of recent major earthquakes in Chile, China, and Haiti reinforce the global perspective on this issue. Emergencies and hazard events pose not only physical and material problems for people with disabilities but can have significant psychological impact on vulnerable populations. As such, they require effective communication networks and infrastructure to mitigate disruption to social environments.

John C. Bricout of the University of Central Florida, Orlando, and Paul M. A. Baker of the Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, point out that [online social networks](#) could be instrumental in addressing the psychological and social needs of persons with disabilities in the context of disasters or other emergency events. They emphasize that consideration must be given to the strengths and weaknesses of such distributed online resources in relation to the specific emergency.

The researchers stress that in the people with disabilities must be involved throughout the developmental and evaluation process of this role for social networks and that their presence as key "stakeholders" will be critical to their effectiveness.

"For emergency communications to engender not only compliance but also mobilization and effective responses they must be embedded in online social networks that function as distributed communities of persons with disabilities, local, regional and beyond and link to providers and critical knowledge/information sources," the researchers say. "The emergency communications become one channel for a broader, relational network that extends from the virtual/online realm into real-world resources and relationships."

There are therefore three main objectives: first coordinated online social networks must be developed that serve the "community" online. Secondly, adequate wireless, web-based and computer-mediated infrastructure that can be sustained during an emergency must be in place. Thirdly, emergency training and simulation must be carried out that tests how well the online social networks might cope in an emergency.

**More information:** "Leveraging online social networks for people with disabilities in emergency communications and recovery" in Int. J. Emergency Management, 2010, 7, 59-74

Provided by Inderscience Publishers

Citation: Emergency online communities (2010, March 4) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-03-emergency-online.html>

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