

Facebook can help in disasters: academic

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Communications expert Gwyneth Howell said she had been prompted to research the use of [social media](#) following last year's major earthquake in New Zealand's second city Christchurch -- which caused damage but no deaths.

The University of Western Sydney academic could not have known more disasters were to follow -- floods and cyclones in Queensland, bushfires in Western Australia, a deadlier quake in Christchurch and

Japan's quake and tsunami.

Howell said that interviews with people who established [Facebook](#) sites to help victims of Queensland's devastating floods in January had demonstrated a "sense of real community" existed in the [virtual space](#).

"That was the thing that struck me... this beautiful display of humanity and [generosity](#) and a sense of 'I don't know you but I want to be able to help'," she told AFP.

"If that's what Facebook is providing and social media is providing people with in times of terrible anguish, I think it's a fantastic resource."

Howell said part of her ongoing research, which will examine how people use social media such as Facebook and [Twitter](#) during a time of crisis, will seek to discover how this medium can be deployed to even greater effect.

She said in the Queensland floods, during which Facebook sites offered news of people's whereabouts, help in reuniting pets with their owners and up-to-date information on flood zones, people used social media as an information source.

"They look at news media on television but they go to places like Facebook," Howell said.

Howell added that in the Queensland town of Toowoomba, which was hit with deadly flash floods in which many people were swept away, most people found out about the tragedy when friends changed their status on Facebook.

"That is where people learned about the disaster, they didn't learn it from mainstream media."

She said even as the situation in Japan, still reeling from last week's 9.0-magnitude quake and deadly tsunami, was unfolding, Facebook and Twitter were being used to make tribute pages and send messages of goodwill.

"That sense of community, I think, is outstanding, and it's what we need," she said.

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