

Tweeting disasters

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Search and rescue. Credit: DVIDSHUB from Flickr

Professor John Preston, who is based at the University of East London's Cass School of Education, will tell the 'Violent Nature' Research Councils UK debate that Twitter and Facebook have been credited with being able to pick up advance signals of disasters. However, it is only in retrospect that the significance of the signals can be ascertained.

The debate focuses on whether governments, scientists and aid agencies can manage the risks of living in potentially lethal locations. Other speakers include Professor James Jackson from the University of Cambridge, Daniel Walden, policy adviser for disaster risk reduction at Save the Children UK and Dr. Andrew Collins, reader and director of the Disaster and Development Center at Northumbria University. It will be chaired by James Randerson, the Guardian's science and environment editor.

Professor Preston is the leader of a two-year cross-disciplinary research program, supported by the the Research Councils UK Global Uncertainties Program, which began in 2010 and seeks to uncover how the likes of Twitter and Facebook could save lives in the event of a national crisis such as a terrorist attack or natural disaster.

He says that where Twitter in particular works well is in correcting information and countering false rumors. “There is an inherent self-correcting bias in Twitter which is like the scientific process. When someone posts it sifts the evidence for and against and the more current information countervails anything that came before,” says Professor Preston, whose book *Disaster Education* is out early next year.

He adds: “Social networks can be used for malicious reasons to spread rumours by targeting false information at a few super-connected people. Information spread this way would take longer to correct.”

Professor Preston says: “Part of the reason authorities are put off using social media to spread information during [disasters](#) is that it can appear quite uncontrollable since information sharing after disasters tends to be followed by a period of emotional reflection on what it means. Emotion is very important in social media. It’s not just about [information](#). People use it quite creatively which can make it a little bit uncontrollable.”

The research program is looking at how to prepare the UK better for disasters, through, for instance, cell broadcasting and community education, and is looking at lessons that can be learnt from the past.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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