

Governments urged to engage social media in disasters

November 11 2015, by Kate Haggman

As Australia braces for another season of summer natural disasters, leading social media researchers are calling for governments to better coordinate their crisis communications.

Researchers from QUT's Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC) have launched a blueprint to formalise social media policies and practices by emergency management organisations in all levels of government across Australia.

The DMRC's Professor Axel Bruns said the ad hoc, varied way those organisations currently use social media in both natural and man-made crises was often confusing for the public.

"Social media are fact, not fad - the media mix is changing and the public now uses social media more and more to get timely, accurate information," said Professor Bruns, from QUT's Creative Industries Faculty.

"In many emergency services organisations, social media policies are still based on gut feeling, with communication officers trying to invent their own approaches in times of crisis - but a crisis is no time to be testing new social media strategies.

"In a crisis, the public needs social media use to be consistent, reliable and not just dependent on the right person being rostered onto the social media desk at the right time.

"Can they rely on an organisation's Twitter or Facebook feed for all the information they need or do they have to search for it on other channels?"

"If the public doesn't know the answer to this beforehand they might miss that critical piece of information that will save their life - the evacuation order, fire update, cyclone warning."

The QUT report, "Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations," recommends a series of measures to foster better cooperation and knowledge-sharing between agencies across jurisdictions, including:

- establishing a national framework for using social media for [crisis communication](#), including shared policies, standards, principles and practices
- creating a national network of social media staff across all emergency management organisations, including standardised professional development and training
- establishing a federal government social media taskforce, focusing on policy initiatives to enhance and regulate social media use.

The report also recommends the Australia and New Zealand Emergency Management Committee be given the task of further developing and driving the recommendations, as it already cuts across state and federal jurisdictions through the COAG process.

"We're not trying to tell these organisations how to suck eggs - we appreciate they know more needs to be done in this space," Professor Bruns said.

"There is a clear hunger among emergency services social media staff for more advice and information on how to do crisis communication

through social media right. They know there needs to be a systemic sharing of knowledge.

"Emergency services staff work incredibly hard to keep the population safe. Implementing the recommendations in this policy proposal will allow them to do their job even more effectively."

QUT social media researcher Judith Newton said the report, an outcome of a three-year Australian Research Council Linkages-Project grant, was informed by extensive research and consultation at all levels of the [emergency management](#) sector.

"We've seen clear examples of what works and doesn't work in social media crisis communications. We've seen the organisational challenges in using social media that still exist," Ms Newton said.

"The Queensland Police Service's work during the 2011 floods has made it an international benchmark for best practice because it was among the earliest to use social media.

"But, largely, support for social media use within these organisations and from their political overseers is variable and depends largely on how much the management teams 'get' social media.

"A formal recognition of policy for social media use in a crisis gives social media workers on the front line the institutional support they need to perform their job well.

"Having a report like this is a key mechanism for us to put [social media](#) crisis communication on the policy agenda and help improve its use."

More information: Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations: socialmedia.qut.edu.au/wp-

[cont ... a-Policy-Report1.pdf](#)

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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