

# Social media is transforming emergency communications, study says

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Social media channel communication (e.g. Twitter and Facebook) is sometimes the only telecommunications medium that survives, and the first to recover as seen in disasters that struck the world in recent years, according to a review study of emergency situations by Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) researchers in the *International Journal of Information Management*.

"Communication is one of the fundamental tools of emergency management, and it becomes crucial when there are dozens of agencies and organizations responding to a disaster," explains Tomer Simon, a Ph.D. candidate in BGU's Department of Emergency Medicine. In the past six years, [social media](#) has been garnering an ever increasing role as a main communication channel in [emergency situations](#)."

Social media provides opportunities and possibilities to interact and engage with people during emergencies by disseminating relevant information and gathering posted information. Emergency managers who were formerly used to one-directional dissemination of information to the population are now exposed to vast amounts of information, originating from the public and typically before formal notifications.

The public was the first to adopt Social Media (SM) in innovative and new ways for their various needs during emergencies. Four main types of SM users during disasters have been identified: (1) Innovative - users who improve and adjust SM for their special circumstances; (2) Reactive - users who try to respond and assist the afflicted population using SM tools for the first time; (3) Responsive - emergency responders that use SM tools regularly, but step-up and leverage them during disasters; (4) Proactive - users or emergency organizations that use SM tools to promote preparedness in routine and are able to leverage them during emergencies.

The first indication of a number of emergencies throughout the world was published on Twitter, which enabled the publication of information to large crowds in real time. The world's first posts on two terrorist incidents in 2013 were published initially via Twitter: the Boston Marathon bombing and the Westgate mall [terror attack](#) in Nairobi, Kenya.

Emergency organizations have only started using social media mainly as a response to the presence of the public in them. According to Simon, "regardless of the type of emergency (a terror attack, hurricane or an earthquake), communication infrastructure may be overloaded and collapse as numerous people attempt to access information. In an [emergency](#), the public is exposed to large quantities of [information](#) without being aware of its validity or risk of misinformation. However, users are typically quick to correct misrepresentation, thus making social media "self-regulating."

Provided by American Associates, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

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