

# Citizen (in)security?: social media, citizen journalism and crisis response

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## ABSTRACT

The use of social media in a crisis has been applauded, and is witnessing an increase in uptake among those involved in crisis management activities, including citizens. Whilst some challenges have been discussed elsewhere, somewhat lacking is a discussion on the impact of sharing information on the security of those that may have been recorded. Accordingly, this working paper aims to provide preliminary results of an initial mapping task that seeks to examine the impact of the use of social media in a crisis on the social and ethical wellbeing of the security of the citizen. Authors argue that the heightened involvement of citizen journalism results in the filtering of information after its online publication which raises concerns relating to the dissemination of false information and a threat to an individual's privacy. Such issues should be adequately addressed in the encouragement and use of citizen contributions in crisis response.

## Keywords

Citizen journalism, ethics, security, social media, crisis response.

## INTRODUCTION

Communication is a critical component of preparing for, responding to and recovering from crises (ITU, 2005). The widespread adoption of new media technologies, and particularly social media, during times of crisis has been met with extensive enthusiasm, particularly with regards to the value and capabilities that applications such as social media are able to contribute to crisis management (Starbird and Palen, 2010; Taylor et al. 2012; etc.). Such applications can help enhance information gathering and problem solving capabilities (Vieweg et al., 2010), enable users to seek reliable information (e.g., Novak and Vidoloff, 2011) and help promote community resilience (Taylor et al. 2012). Recent studies also suggest that members of the public can utilize new communication technologies to provide crisis-related information, which, if gathered by response organizations, can be used to guide response efforts and help enhance situational awareness (Merrick and Duffy, 2013). However, as this working paper will show, in some instances, whilst sharing information may contribute to response efforts, the information shared about the scene of a crisis may involve recording of citizens by other citizens, including citizen journalists. As such, it is important for these "known" ethical and social issues to be mapped in a more cohesive fashion in order to adequately inform organizations, as well as other stakeholders, requesting and sharing information, of the various social and ethical implications for ensuring the security of the citizen as a result of such uses of social media in a crisis.

This working paper stems from work conducted in the European Commission funded project, COSMIC (Contribution Of Social Media In Crisis management). In brief, COSMIC aims to deliver a set of guidelines on the exploitation of social media in emergency situations. This mapping task is based on desk-based research involving the exploration of relevant literature including peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, news articles, and industry reports.

## SOCIAL MEDIA & THE SECURITY OF THE CITIZEN

The increased use of social media in a crisis can often involve the recording of the self and others at the scene of a crisis; for instance photos and video footage may provide visual evidence of an individual being present and/or help identify individuals in a given area, or message or status updates may contain data that makes the content either intentionally or inadvertently geographically identifiable. This can result in vast volumes of information being uploaded to the Internet, where, unless securely stored, they are freely available for anyone with access to the web to view, and in some situations, utilize for their own means. As this sub-section will show, the sharing of such information could lead to citizens being left in a vulnerable situation that jeopardizes their wellbeing. Whilst there are other threats to the security of the citizen in the event of a crisis, including the impact of unreliable information on their wellbeing, vulnerability to malicious online attacks etc., this sub-section will focus on two negative consequences relating to the misuse of social media in a crisis: the loss of a person's anonymity and the effect of online vigilante behavior.

A significant threat to the security of citizens, whom may be recorded in the event of a crisis, is a failure to safeguard their anonymity. When considering information security in relation to crisis management activities, as identified by Yates and Paquette (2011), there is a danger that following some crises, the mining of data by some could be used for identity theft as well as other malicious activities targeted at vulnerable groups. Furthermore, as noted by Yates and Paquette (Ibid.) even when personal identity information may be masked, there is still the threat that the collection and analysis of weak identifiers could lead to uncovering a person's true identity.

The latter type of threat may be particularly dangerous when considering the use of social media in political crises. Being able to locate individuals in particular places can associate them with certain activities that can put citizen journalists and other individuals at risk in highly volatile political situations. For instance, as argued by Joseph (2012), the use of social media during the Arab revolutions in 2011, and onwards, met with resistance whereby some government authorities restricted access to the web and others, including Iran and Belarus, used citizens' social media trails to identify, locate, and target online dissidents. Consequently, this may be particularly troublesome if there is the potential danger of any identifiable information being shared or subsequently collected by others for intelligence purposes. As such, as argued by Rive et al. (2012) it is essential that those organizations involved in sharing material such as photos of disaster sites, take the appropriate measures to ensure the privacy of the public is upheld (e.g., masking faces and vehicle number plates), and where required, ensure that permission is gained from people to ensure their anonymity is protected.

In some types of crises, citizens could be in danger of physical or social harm. Following the 2013 Boston marathon attacks, there was extensive evidence of the use of the social networking site, Reddit, by citizens to gather pictorial evidence (as also requested by the Boston Police) from the scene of the attacks. In an attempt to crowdsource the identification of the culprits, Reddit users shared their images leading to the wrongful identification of innocent individuals. Such vigilante efforts led to the infamous mis-identification of Sunil Tripathi, who was eventually discovered as a suicide victim, as well as two young men from the greater Boston area who are pursuing a lawsuit against the *New York Post*, which printed the photos of two men as the culprits of the attacks, for "libel, negligent infliction of emotional distress, and invasion of privacy" (Sacchetti, 2013). In both cases, the *New Statesman* argues that the inter-linkage between social media and crowdsourcing "led to images stripped of their context being passed around as though they were confirmed" (Hern, 2013). Similarly, as identified by Rizza et al. (2013), vigilante justice was also present following riots associated with the June 2011 ice hockey Stanley Cup final series in Vancouver. The riots led to individuals taking it upon themselves to publicize the riots via social media, and to share information and data (upon request) that would assist in identifying suspected rioters. Furthermore, they then engaged in "do it yourself justice" by publicly damning those responsible via social networking sites, which Rizza et al. have labelled a form of "bad ethics". As identified by Rizza et al. (2013, p. 6), perhaps there is a need for "authorities to establish clear rules regarding citizen cooperation in a crisis situation" and greater education for members of the public. Thus, crowdsourcing behavior in the face of some types of crisis, if un-regulated, could potentially increase the risk that innocent individuals are inappropriately labelled and targeted, which, in turn, may cause them physical harm if they are approached by members of the public, as well as emotional distress and social stigma.

In these instances, the use of social media by members of the public can result in harm to specific individuals who were erroneously identified through vigilante justice and potential harm to responders, including members of the public, who may be operating in a crisis. In addition to these social implications on the security of the citizen there are also ethical implications to consider.

## CITIZEN JOURNALISM & SOME ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In recent years, it is often the case that individuals at the scene of a crisis are those most likely to be the ones who provide the first account of an event, however, their activities have been met with grave concern among some practitioners.

With respect to ethical problems associated with the dissemination of misinformation, it should be noted that most citizen journalists, who are typically not trained in reporting, are unaware of ethical codes within journalism, such as the need for fact-checking and source confirmation (Riaz and Pasha, 2011). In the context of citizen journalism during emergencies, this lack of awareness is also coupled with a need to make quick decisions about newsworthiness. Indeed, in online interviews we conducted with citizen journalists who covered recent emergencies and crises, such as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey and the Haiti earthquake, we observed that some citizen journalists might even consider not having to “fact-check” as an advantage they have over journalists reporting for the news media. Accordingly, for this subset of citizen journalists, the logic of citizen journalism differs in its emphasis on the logic of “publish, then filter” rather than “filter, then publish” (Bowman and Willis, 2003). It should be noted that in these interviews we also found out that some of the citizen journalists, particularly those who consider the content they produce to be oriented towards analysis/critique of events rather than their reporting, did not report experience any pressure to publish immediately and hence did not face any dilemmas in terms of fact-checking.

Consequently, it is not surprising to see that concerns about information ethics constitute a major obstacle against the widespread use of such tools for Public Protection and Disaster Relief (PPDR) purposes. Manso and Manso (2012) have highlighted that PPDR organizations “distrust online social media as a credible information source and a viable communication tool with citizens in crises” and that “the absence of a thorough ethical and legal framework to address the issues raised by the use of social media in crisis response efforts also contributes to the PPDRs’ general skepticism towards the integration of new social media as an additional public communication tool”.

PPDR organizations also question the ethical implications and risks relating to the use of social media and crowdsourcing methods (e.g., risk maps) in a crisis to potentially place individuals at risk, particularly in relation to their privacy (Teixeira et al., 2013). Accordingly, whilst crowdsourcing methods can support disaster relief efforts, in the case of political crises the use of social media can be used to target political dissenters. Consequently, the protection of privacy of individuals during political crisis is not only an end in itself, but rather also a means toward the protection of fundamental liberties of individuals, such as the freedom of association and freedom of speech. That is, without proper safeguards for privacy, the potential permanence and diffusiveness of data about individuals may have a chilling effect on the extent to which dissenting opinions can be shaped and communicated (Baruh, 2007).

A second ethical concern relating to privacy pertains to the possibility that dissemination of information (including photos) about individuals without their consent may compromise their dignity. In the case of the 2005 London bombings, newsrooms at the BBC and ITV received images sent by individuals present at the scene of the attacks (Reading, 2009). In addition to the graphic nature of the images, a major concern for these institutions was the privacy of the victims and the possible use of their images. Whereas in the news media, editorial guidelines require such images to be filtered before being disseminated, in social networks, as a result of the “publish and then filter” logic, this control may occur *after* publication, at which time it is possible that the image in question may have already been replicated, shared and circulated elsewhere. In order to provide at least a minimal framework for the ethical implications of blogging, popular platforms including *Blogger* and *Wordpress*, are developing user policies that formulate general standards of harm avoidance in an effort to avoid the possible social consequences of the inaccurate use of social media, which is crucial especially in times of crisis (Kuhn, 2007). Likewise, institutions like the BBC, who, since the Mumbai attacks in 2008, have introduced guidelines for user-generated contributions, where the ‘safety of contributors’ is a priority (BBC, 2014). Indeed, while acknowledging the importance of contribution from citizen journalists, the BBC maintains that it will not accept any contributions if the collection of information placed individuals at risk, breached emergency service lines, or may lead to identification of individuals in ways that may endanger them.

## CONCLUSION

Citizen involvement in emergency communications, particularly with the rise of social media applications that allow for the quick publication and dissemination of information offers important opportunities for improving response efforts. However, widespread utilization of social media by individuals to report information about

emergencies may also have important ethical implications for the security of citizens. This paper has briefly discussed the implications of the use of social media for the recording of others on the security of the citizen, including the danger of the lack of anonymous information as well as the threat of the spread of false information. Authors have also briefly discussed two primary ethical concerns stemming from these concerns including the code of practice among those collecting and sharing information and the implications of citizen journalism on a person's privacy.

One solution that can help alleviate the problem of information reliability in citizen reporting of emergencies is the extension of collaboration between citizen journalists and the news media. For example, the "tier 1.5 approach" that is utilized by citizen journalism portals like OhMyNews.com, aims to increase cooperation between professional and citizen journalists in the fact-checking and editing processes (Martha, 2010). Likewise, Johansson et al. (2012) suggest that adoption of a number of measures, which are already widely adopted by institutions, like the use of strict data retention periods, avoiding the storage of user IDs in databases and other measures that can strengthen citizens' privacy (e.g. techniques for privacy-preserving data mining) could potentially address privacy concerns raised by citizen reporting during emergencies. Such measures require further examination for promoting a safer, more ethical stance on encouraging citizen efforts in the sharing of information in a crisis.

This paper has set out to provide a *preliminary* discussion of the results of an initial mapping task that has sought to collate known, and recognized, ethical and societal considerations for engaging with social media to aid crisis management efforts. In addition to those ethical and social challenges discussed in this paper, COSMIC will also examine those opportunities that stem from the use of new media applications in crisis management, including for instance: opportunities that will be addressed include – swiftness of mobilization, network building, new forms of organization, alternative forms of information and its ability to enhance citizens' wellbeing. This examination, will be used as part of the COSMIC project to provide good practice guidelines and policy recommendations to those stakeholder directly involved in crisis management, as well as, members of the public, whom may be interacting with new media applications, in order to ensure that their direct and indirect interaction with others via new media is conducted in a manner that is beneficial to them, whilst being respectful of other people's ethical and social wellbeing.

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