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Report: Social Media During Emergencies Guide
Report for the LGA of SA prepared by Sarah Bishop, Activate Consulting based on information collated from the contributors referred to on page 5, consultation with SA Councils and SA Emergency Service Agencies and the LGA of SA. Please refer to introduction for more details.

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Introduction

A phenomenon of major emergency events in recent times is the explosion of interest on social media.

During a Bushfire Discussion Exercise conducted by the Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA), participating Councils identified the need to better understand, monitor and manage social media during disasters.

This Managing Social Media During Emergencies Guide is designed to assist Councils to better plan, manage and continue to improve the effectiveness of social media use during an emergency event.

It has been developed from the knowledge and experience shared by the following contributors during the LGA’s Managing Social Media During Emergencies one-day workshop held in December 2015:

• Dr Mel Irons - Tassie Bushfires (2013)
• Tracy Whitelaw - Brisbane floods (2011 & 13)
• Elissa Graves - Sampson Flat Bushfire (2015)
• John Mundy - LGA of SA - IT/ESP Manager
• Fiona Dunstan – South Australian Country Fire Service
• Neville Hyatt - LGA of SA - Senior Policy Officer, Infrastructure and Emergency Management
• Sama Reid - LGA of SA - Marketing & Communications Manager

The Social Media During Emergencies Guide is not a definitive guide, but provides an overarching approach with links to more detailed information. It is recommended that it is used in conjunction with your Council Emergency Management and Communication policies and procedures.

Associated documents and further information

This Guide covers social media use specifically in relation to emergency events.

For more general information about social media, please refer to the Social Media 101 Guide for Councils (available through http://lgnetworking.ning.com) which is also supported by a Template Social Media Policy and basic ‘how-to’ user guides for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Instagram.

For more information specific to Emergency Management, please refer to http://www.safecom.sa.gov.au

If you have questions, or would like further information about anything in this guide, please contact the LGA staff who would be happy to help, or put you in touch with someone that can.
Profiles of contributors

Dr Mel Irons

On 4 January 2013, Mel created her Facebook page while babysitting a friend’s child wanting to help with the fire-fighting effort. The local ABC radio assisted her in spreading the word, and the page amassed 21,000 followers within 18 days. Her work with her Tassie Fires We Can Help page was credited as a major influence and help during the destruction of the town of Dunalley, Tasmania, organising aid, communicating with the community and acting as an alert system. Her page also prompted Tasmania Police to open their own social media accounts. She was the focus on an ABC Australian Story documentary Irons In The Fire.

Tracy Whitelaw

Tracy Whitelaw is the Manager of Digital Media at the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games. She is a passionate speaker, educator and trainer in digital and social media and has been working in online communications for over 20 years. Tracy is currently completing a PhD part-time at Bond University on social media use in disasters based on her experience of managing Brisbane City Council’s social media for five years, including during the Brisbane floods of 2011 and 2013. She approaches digital and social media from a strategic, operational and academic perspective.

Elissa Graves

With extensive experience in communications planning and the implementation of projects, Elissa has a degree in management and over 16 years practical experience in local government. In her role as Manager Customer and Communications at the City of Tea Tree Gully, Elissa has had the opportunity to focus on strategic development and implementation of customer experience with a focus on digital service delivery, communications and integration of social media. Elissa played a key role in management of media and social media in the response and recovery of the South Australian Sampson Flat Bushfire. Elissa has a passion for leading people and is committed to the development and advancement of her team and organisation in the areas of customer experience, marketing and communications.

John Mundy

John is the Electronic Services Program Manager at the Local Government Association of South Australia. He is driven by a passion for the practical. His vision is one of Councils working together, pooling their resources and delivering consistent high quality information to their communities via the digital channel. Of recent time John has led the development of the My Local Services App that now has 41 Councils across South Australia signed on for the delivery of information and services via the mobile platform. John led discussions on preparing your website and mobile Apps to communicate when emergency situations arise.

Fiona Dunstan

For the past 12 years Fiona has worked for the SA Country Fire Service (CFS). Fiona is currently employed as the Manager Information Operations and is responsible for the coordination and delivery of the CFS’s public awareness campaigns, website, social media, communications, media, community engagement and public warning messages to South Australian residents living in bushfire risk locations. Fiona brings many years of experience in working within the field of community engagement and in working with communities to help develop long-term behaviour change.
The rise and role of Social Media in Emergency Management

Social media is an important communication tool in emergency situations, such as bushfires, flooding and other crises. Information can be quickly and easily shared on social media, and sites such as Twitter use very little bandwidth making them excellent for use in an emergency.

Along with emergency services, people naturally look to local government social media channels during an emergency. For this reason, it is important that you are clear on how your organisation will use social media in times of emergency, and pre-prepare for this.

The use of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter are widely becoming a core part of emergency management practice in Australia and across the world. Some key examples include:

- Brisbane floods (2011)
- Christchurch earthquakes (2011)
- Japanese earthquake and tsunami (2011)
- Boston Marathon bombings (2013)
- Nepalese earthquake (2015)

However, according to the 2015 QUT Report “Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations” most Australian emergency management organisations have Facebook pages and Twitter accounts, but for many, their use remains tentative and experimental. (http://socialmedia.qut.edu.au/crisiscommsreport.pdf).

What can social media be used for?

There are a number of ways social media can be used to aid emergency management, including:

- Communicating important, timely information to the community (this also includes dispelling/correcting inaccurate information)
- Gaining situational information and insight from the community to inform emergency management and response
- Coordinating and sharing information among emergency response staff and agencies in multiple locations
- Connecting communities with support services and each other
- Coordinating and focussing volunteers in key areas of need
- Building preparedness in the community prior to an emergency
Social media in emergencies – one-page checklist

Use this checklist to see if your council is prepared and ready to use social media effectively during an emergency. More detail about each of the items is available further in this guide.

Before an emergency
• Executive understand and support how social media will be used during an emergency and the required resources have been properly scoped and endorsed
• A Social Media Policy/Procedures is in place and communicated throughout the organisation
• A Social Media Suite is in place including: Policy/procedures, Guidelines, a Standard Operations Plan (SOP), Escalation Guidelines, Standard Responses Document and Credible Sources List
• Staff have access to use social media inside the organisation and are trained and confident on how to use it technically, appropriately and in line with procedures.
• The social media strategy focuses on how to nurture and grow our online community BEFORE an emergency
• A template splash-page is ready for the website so it can be implemented quickly
• An aggregation tool is in place to broadcast information, monitor and respond, and gain information from multiple social media accounts at once
• A back-up plan is in place if the website and/or internet and telephone lines are down

During an emergency
• The Social Media Suite is easy to access by all relevant staff and is followed
• Content is timely, consistent, transparent and most importantly engaging and supportive
• Posts use pre-approved hashtags and are time and date-stamped to help the community sort and prioritise
• Intel from social media is validated and fed to emergency response staff and vice-versa
• Emergent online groups are monitored and supported where appropriate
• Social media staff are supported, both physically and mentally

After an emergency
• The social media strategy continues throughout the RECOVERY phase and the splash-page is updated
• Success measures and evaluation methods have been established, and an evaluation process is prioritised
• Lessons are used to enhance the future SM strategy and are shared among the organisation and wider-sector
• The online community is thanked and nurtured
Preparing for a crisis

Organisations that successfully utilise social media in a crisis or emergency situation all have something in common – they have dedicated significant time to planning and strategy while in a ‘business as usual’ period.

This section outlines key things to consider now.

Know your role

A fundamental question is the extent to which you will use social media during an emergency and how this will complement the activity of other agencies such as emergency services. Will you?

• Disseminate your own original information and updates or simply share important information from reputable sources (such as emergency services)?
• Monitor channels for information and insights on the situation or actively ask and seek specific feedback from your community?
• Strategically use it as a tool to connect people to support services and each other, or simply support emerging groups where you can with information?

It is essential that these issues are considered, agreed, documented and included in your formal emergency management procedures to avoid confusion in the heat of the moment. Failure to do this can risk adding to the confusion that arises during emergency situations.

It is critical that this is discussed, understood and agreed at the executive level to ensure it is given the priority and resourcing it needs if a crisis arises.

Have a clear social media suite in place

Every organisation that intends on using social media during a crisis must ensure they have a Social Media Suite in place.

A typical Social Media Suite includes (but is not limited to):

• Social Media Policy/Procedure*
• Social Media Guidelines*
• Social Media Crisis Standard Operations Plan (SOP) or inclusion in a Crisis Communication SOP
• Escalation Table or Flowchart
• Approved Standard Responses Document
• Approved Credible Sources List

*Templates of these documents are available through the LGA - email marketing@lga.sa.gov.au to request a copy.
Social Media Policy/Procedure

A Social Media Policy/Procedure should be approved, in place and communicated before a crisis.

Your Policy should contain rules around use of social media channels, who has access to them, what channels can be used and implications of misuse of the channels. If you don’t already have one, the LGA has developed a Template Social Media Policy that can be used and adapted to suit your needs (available through [http://lgnetworking.ning.com](http://lgnetworking.ning.com)).

Ideally, the Policy should be short or summarised in a way that makes it really easy to digest in a short amount of time (such as during an emergency situation). For example, a two-page summary, or even a short video.

The Victorian Department of Justice has a great example of an effective video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ws3Bd3QjINs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ws3Bd3QjINs)

Most importantly, trust your staff. Give them access to social media inside the organisation, otherwise you are missing the opportunity to use them as advocates for sharing your messages during a crisis, and you miss out on the possibility of also communicating directly with them via social media as a contingency plan should you have any issues with your own internal platforms or website.

Social Media Guidelines

Social Media Guidelines exist to explain in a concise manner how to engage on your social media channels. This should refer to your tone of voice, content use, approvals and general tips on how to handle responding via various channels.

These should be short and perhaps presented in a ‘top ten tips’ style or ‘top five do’s and don’ts’ to keep the audience engaged. Another approach is to include a response flow chart to help staff work out how to appropriately respond to different types of posts on social media (a sample response guideline is included in the LGA Template Social Media Policy).

You may choose to combine the Social Media Policy and Guidelines into the one document.

Social Media Crisis Standard Operations Plan

Once you have decided how your organisation will use social media during a crisis, it’s important to document this in your organisational Standard Operations Plan (SOP). This is where you should outline any operational tasks and processes that must be put in place during a crisis.

The SOP should serve as a blueprint for those who need to implement social media, often without training, in a high-pressure environment. Consider the following information:

- Clearly define the role of each social media channel and how it should be used in the emergency situation
- Roles and responsibilities for each of the social media team, process for notifying the team and template roster
- How to access important documents such as the Social Media Policy and Guidelines, escalation table, key contacts lists etc
- Step-by-step instructions on how to log into accounts and activate your website splash-page
- Where to find standard responses and approved credible sources lists
- Approval processes for social media content
- The type of information that should be posted and frequency
Escalation Table or Flowchart

Producing a one page, easy to follow escalation process is critical to ensuring there are no issues around content approvals or escalation of crisis issues. Use a simply tool like PowerPoint to develop a flowchart that clearly outlines the process involved in escalating a crisis issue within your organisation.

Make sure that this is available to everyone likely to be representing you on social media channels and ensure all relevant stakeholders have agreed to it. Circulate this as part of the SOP or independent of it, but primarily ensure it is easy to access at all times.

Approved Standard Responses Document

One of the biggest issues in a crisis is getting approval for responses. Often, the public turns to social media early in the crisis, seeking reassurance that the situation is under control. Time is very much of the essence and having pre-approved standard responses ready to go quickly can create a sense of calm and control in your audience.

The standard responses should cover every possible known threat and should also have a number of generic responses and ‘holding statements’: A holding statement is used to reassure the public that you have read their comment and are dealing with it. This gives you extra time to investigate further.

An example of a holding statement would be “Thank you for letting us know. We’re aware of the situation and will be back to you as soon as possible with further info. Please stay tuned for updates”.

It’s also a good idea to have a list of pre-planned #hashtags that you will use along with your standard responses. Common ones include #mythbust and #thanks, but you should also develop some specific to your location or audience.

You are in the field responding to Ebola in West Africa

You should use these hashtags on twitter

- #EbolaLR For Liberia
- #EbolaSL For Sierra Leone
- #EbolaGN For Guinea
- #EbolaResponse To tell the world what you are doing
- #EbolaNeed To share with us what is currently needed

Include the exact location in your tweet, it will help us for mapping and analysis

Consider this example of how standardised #hashtags were used to help map the spread and response to the Ebola virus, and help people monitoring social media to cut through the noise of everything else on Twitter.

For more information read ‘Hashtag Standards for Emergencies’, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, October 2014 - see more at https://app.box.com/s/yvobt4n9wprqa8sd0887
Approved Credible Sources List

Unfortunately, whether intentionally or by accident, there have been many cases where social media has been detrimental during a crisis because its use has spread incorrect or inaccurate information.

When sharing information during a crisis it is essential that your sources are credible (whether that is information received on social media or by other means). Establishing an approved credible sources list prior to a crisis is a critical way to manage this.

Use Excel to develop this list, keep it updated and add media, lead agencies, emergency response agencies, influential community members and more. Then, make sure it is included in your SOP (as outlined above) and freely available.

Here is an example template:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Channel</th>
<th>Link</th>
<th>Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SA Police</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/sapolicenews">https://www.facebook.com/sapolicenews</a></td>
<td>Emergency information updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA Police</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td><a href="https://www.twitter.com/sapolicenews">https://www.twitter.com/sapolicenews</a></td>
<td>Emergency information updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA Metropolitan Fire Service</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td><a href="https://www.twitter.com/sa_mfs">https://www.twitter.com/sa_mfs</a></td>
<td>Emergency information updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC Emergency</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td><a href="https://www.twitter.com/abcemergency">https://www.twitter.com/abcemergency</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA SES</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td><a href="https://www.twitter.com/sa_ses">https://www.twitter.com/sa_ses</a></td>
<td>Emergency response updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Red Cross</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/australianredcross">https://www.facebook.com/australianredcross</a></td>
<td>Relief centres and support information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA EPA</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td><a href="https://www.twitter.com/sa_epa">https://www.twitter.com/sa_epa</a></td>
<td>Environmental information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://www.facebook.com/sabushfirerecovery">https://www.facebook.com/sabushfirerecovery</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="https://twitter.com/SA_DCSI">https://twitter.com/SA_DCSI</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With a credible sources list in place you know you can freely and confidently share information from anyone on this list during a crisis without having to spend valuable time validating sources in the heat of the moment.
Develop a social media strategy

Once you have your Social Media Suite in place, consider your Social Media Strategy and make it specific to emergency management (this may form a sub-set of your organisation’s overall social media and communications strategy).

Your strategy does not need to be long, but should clearly answer the following questions:

What are your objectives?

This comes back to being clear on the role you want social media to play in your emergency management procedures. Typical sets of objectives are: audience reach, information management, information sharing and community mobilisation.

Who is the audience you need to reach?

You may have more than one audience, and they may vary depending on the type of emergency, each needing different information provided in varying ways or places. Common audiences to consider include:

- Those in certain geographic areas
- Communities more vulnerable in an emergency (e.g., aged or isolated)
- People that have great networks and who will mobilise to assist in times of emergency

It can be helpful to put together a basic profile of your audience(s) to remind you when you are developing content.

What social media channels will you use?

Find out where your audiences are already, or where they will go to find emergency information. Similarly, think about what channels your credible sources are sharing their information on and whether it will be easy for you to access and share.

Also consider whether you have the skills, content, time and resources during an emergency to effectively utilise the different channels. There is nothing wrong with directing your audiences to one or two key channels only during a crisis – just as long as you make that very clear. This is where having live feeds from your social media channels onto a special/static home page of your website can be a real advantage.

What content will you develop and provide?

What content in what format will be of interest to your audience and encourage them to engage with your channel? It’s a good idea to develop a content strategy that covers the three key stages: pre-emergency (business as usual), during an emergency (as per your SOP) and post-emergency (during recovery phase).

What time and how frequently will you post?

Timing can make a big impact on the effectiveness of your activity. Again you should consider pre-, during and post-emergency stages.

It is also important to consider when you will be monitoring your social media channels and clearly communicate this to your audiences. For example, it may be appropriate to monitor your channels from 9am-5pm weekdays during business as usual, but possibly 24/7 during an emergency and reduced again during recovery.
How will you resource this plan?

You can only do as much on social media as you are resourced to do. If you have created a presence, it should be appropriately resourced. It is better not to have a presence at all, than to have a presence and be inconsistent or go quiet. See below for more information about resourcing.

How and what will you monitor, record and evaluate?

Consider which tools you will use to monitor your social media channels, record all your social media activity and evaluate your success. There are a number of tools for various budgets:

Monitoring and evaluating:

- Sprout Social – cost effective and detailed engagement, listening and reporting tool that works across multiple channels including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn and more
- Salesforce Marketing Cloud (formally known as only Radian6) – an enterprise solution for engagement, listening and reporting. This has in-depth customization, workflow, team management and analytics and is for a larger organisation
- Hootsuite – An industry favourite, Hootsuite is a low cost solution that allows you to manage your social media channels across teams and with minimal workflow. This is a cheap alternative and is often all most team would require.
- Meltwater Buzz – another enterprise solution for social engagement, listening and reporting. Has a number of team management options and workflow, but not as detailed as Salesforce Marketing Cloud

Evaluating only:

- Facebook Insights – free, native Facebook reporting and analytics tool
- Twitter Analytics – free, native Twitter reporting and analytics tool

Record keeping:

- Backupify, SocialSafe or others - automatically back up all your social media activity at regular intervals and convert it to PDF
Prepare a splash-page for your website

A key way to help your community access the latest information from the most reliable sources is to strategically use your website as a one-stop-shop.

Setting up a special web page, also known as a splash-page, to replace your normal homepage during an emergency is a great way to make sure people easily find the urgent information they need.

The page should include critical information relevant to the stage of the emergency (ie response, recovery), phone numbers of all key emergency agencies and services, and links or live feeds from your various social media channels (and perhaps those of key agencies).

It is important to prepare this page in advance so it can be quickly implemented when an emergency arises.

The LGA is currently working with the Unity CMS provider to develop a template website splash-page for every Council in SA to adapt and use (even those not currently on the Unity platform).

There are a number of benefits to this approach including:

- Helping your community identify the reliable sources of information quickly
- Reducing some pressure on call centre staff
- Giving those in your community that do not use social media a place they can still access the updated, timely information that social media provides
- Creating a portal through which your community can access and connect with you via social media (building your online community)

There are also social media aggregating tools that you can use to do this for you (like the one pictured on next page).

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Event title - Emergency Information

*This is a quick link page activated during emergencies only.*

For emergencies call 000.

ABC Emergency  
Police  
Government of South Australia  
Alert SA  
SES  
MFS  
CFS  
Recovery

Latest updates from Council click here.
Nurture your online community

Another critical success factor for organisations engaging on social media in emergencies is that they have spent time building their community during business as usual. Doing this means that when a crisis hits their platform/s are already established, have an engaged audience and most of all, are trusted. It is too late to build a community during a crisis and often someone else will fill the gap before you.

Nurturing and building your online community should be a key aim of your Social Media Strategy. In building this community, you will benefit from:

• Understanding your influencers and being able to tap into them during crisis
• Extending your reach as your network will already be growing
• Getting support from your network to self-manage and edit trolls, difficult community members or other negativity
• Being seen as the authority in a crisis, making your content reliable, trust-worthy and the central source of trust.

Self-editing to help cut through the noise that exists in social media.
This paper by Tracey Whitelaw entitled: ‘All that I’m hearing from you, is white noise: social media aggregation in emergency response’ is a good resource for further information https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-29-04-10

Allocate sufficient resources

Developing and contributing to social media sites takes resources, time and expertise – during an emergency situation this is amplified.

If your organisations executive is not committed to effectively resourcing social media during a crisis then change your approach, do not ‘try anyway’. A poorly managed channel can do more damage than no presence at all.

Things to consider when resourcing your social media during an emergency:

• How will you cover the high-pressure environment and 24/7 demands? What shift lengths are appropriate?
• Where will your staff access and run the social media from? Will they be able to get there?
• Do all the staff on your roster have the appropriate skills, training and confidence? (ie pulling in volunteers is not always a good solution)
• What if your staff are themselves affected by the emergency situation?

What technology, devices and infrastructure (ie wireless internet) do you need?

• What tools can you set up to help? (refer to the monitoring and evaluating tools listed earlier)

It is also important to have a back-up plan, in case your website server is down, or internet and phone lines are down. How could you get people outside the affected area (your VOST.. see below) to help? Should you consider cloud-based services?
Set up your VOST

A VOST is a Virtual Operating Support Team - a team of trusted agents (VOSTies) that can lend support via the internet to those on-site who may otherwise be overwhelmed by the volume of data generated during a disaster.

You can set up your own VOST with a trusted network of community members or staff from across the organisation – or even social media managers or officers from other councils outside your immediate area. Victoria has one: [http://vostvic.net.au/](http://vostvic.net.au/).

A great example of this approach was the ‘Cyclone Yasi Update’ Facebook Page created on 31 January 2011 [https://www.facebook.com/Cyclone-Yasi-Update-105722036172382/timeline](https://www.facebook.com/Cyclone-Yasi-Update-105722036172382/timeline). This was a community-led initiative set up as a disaster management hub that brought together official information from many sources to provide affected communities with a reliable ‘one-stop-shop’ to access important information to help them help themselves.

Central to its success was the fact that it had 12 administrators and content managers that were geographically dispersed – from Merimbula in northern NSW to Cairns in northern QLD – and each with their own set of skills and/or expertise.

Build knowledge and confidence

No matter how good your social media suite, it is useless without staff that are trained and confident on social media, and how to apply it in an emergency.

The 2015 QUT Report “Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations” recommends four key areas of social media training:

1. Social media basics – introduction to social media, the different platforms and how to use them.
2. Communication skills for social media – how to undertake effective two-way communication through social media using storytelling, writing, photos and videos.
3. Communications management – understanding how social media fits within a broader communication strategy, fundamental communication practices such as key messaging, consistency, moderation and dealing with criticism.
4. Digital media literacy – building a basic understanding of telecommunications and the internet, simple graphic design, how to use monitoring tools, and gain insights from metrics and analytics.


The LGA offers social media training programs and resources. For more information please contact us.

In addition to social media training, it’s also important to provide training specific to your organisations social media suite and emergency management practices.

The best way for staff to build confidence is to practice, so also consider including social media in your regular emergency management practice exercises. This is a critical way for social media staff to practice and build confidence, but also to train other emergency management staff how to interact with the social team during a crisis.
During a crisis

The most important thing to remember when using social media in a crisis response period is to follow your SOP and pre-determined strategy.

Activate your website splash-page

Your website, social media and call centre will be the first place many in your community will initially turn for information. Activating your splash-page immediately will help direct people to the right sources and your preferred channels for timely updates. It may also reduce the number of calls to your customer service team.

It is very important that no matter how people contact you (social, website or call), the information you are providing is consistent. This means it is critical your call centre staff are aware of the information being displayed on your website splash-page and check it regularly to avoid confusion. Refer to page 15 for information about a splash-page.

Set clear expectations

Be very clear in setting expectations with your community about what you can do in an emergency and what you can’t. This should include what they can expect from you on social media, for example:

• Will you be replying to their comments and/or private messages?
• What do you want them to use the channel for? Getting information? Providing feedback?
• How frequently do you intend to post information? Hourly updates?
• When will the page be monitored? 24/7?
• Where would you like them to report issues? On your social media channel or on a dedicated emergency line?
• What are the key emergency numbers they should know?

Ideally, these statements should be pre-prepared so you can immediately update your channels. It’s a good idea to also think about how you will make this information prominent, for example, pinning a post to the top of your page on Facebook, or scheduling regular tweets linking to this information on your website.
Operational tasks

As soon as you’re activated in a crisis (or in some cases before), you should put in place some plans to ensure that you can mobilise effectively and within a tight time frame. Some ideas to implement are:

- Hot topics – collate key areas of feedback or requests and feed these back hourly to your crisis centre or emergency response staff. Google Docs is a good tool to effectively do this.
- Twitter list - Dedicate a list to lead agencies/media/relevant organisations/influential community members and promote this.
- Hashtags – Agree on the most popular or common hashtag early on and stick with it. It’s often the same as the community hashtag. Develop your own in a strategic way to steer conversation as the stages of the crisis progress.

Engage

One of the most important and impactful aspects of using social media during a crisis is the opportunity to humanise your organisation and truly engage in meaningful, two-way dialogue with the community.

Ensure that you sign off posts with your name when responding to enquiries and always try and say thank you at the end of the night when you’re finished your shift. Building this type of rapport with your audience shows a more personalised side of the organisation and can assist greatly in building your social capital.

Add personality to your channels by figuring out what your brand identity is and take inspiration from other agencies on how they choose to communicate. Sometimes you need to accept that doing what you are going to do does have some element of risk but as long as it is not going to put someone in danger why not give it a go.

There are a number of organisations doing community engagement via social media well:

- Queensland Police Service,
- Telstra,
- Virgin Australia,
- Woolworths,
- South Australia Federal Police Force and others.
Listen

Social media is the perfect vehicle to obtain situational awareness on what is happening during a crisis.

Use the information that your community is providing you to feed back to emergency responders or operational and logistical teams within your organisation. If possible, set up an easy to view dashboard for your emergency response team to view.

There are a number of tools that can do this for you, including:

- **Stackla** – a social media aggregation tool that can display content from a number of channels, users, accounts, hashtags and more within a certain area, all on one easy to view page.
- **Crowdmap** – Crowdmap is a tool that is owned by Ushahidi. These tools are increasingly used in crisis, as they are agile, free and customisable. The community can provide reports to this platform and Ushahidi has an active volunteer community who can assist in a crisis.
- **Hootsuite** - a low cost solution that allows you to view and manage your social media channels (covers the majority of key channels) and feeds all in the one place
- **LiveTweetApp or TweetWallPro** - helps you search, aggregate, moderate and display tweets on a (big) screen. These works for twitter only.

The key here is to show the importance of being able to not only share information, but also gather useful information. However, for that to be a success it’s important to trust your community and rely on their feedback. A key phrase used at Brisbane City Council is ‘if ten people tell us the road is closed, the road is closed’.

An example post you could make is “We have received information about xyz, can anyone confirm this?”. Also consider requesting photographs as a way to validate information.
Work with emerging groups

During an emergency situation communities will come together to provide assistance, both online and offline. This could include volunteers to help with clean up, provision of free food and shelter, or people organising fundraising events.

The community genuinely wants to help – give them good accurate information and make them feel valued, and they can do your work for you. However, maintain focus on your key role and objectives, be smart and let the community help itself but with your guidance.

When dealing with emerging groups, there’s a number of important points to ensure that things go as smoothly as possible.

- Engage with the group early, acknowledge their existence and thank them for their contribution or desire to participate.
- Escalate their existence to the relevant lead authority, whether that’s internally or externally.
- Start following the groups accounts and hashtags and make sure that you’re receiving alerts from them.
- Try to identify leaders in the emergent group and consider collaboration or bringing them ‘into the fold’. They can provide significant situational awareness and can benefit from information being circulated internally.

One of the difficulties with emergency groups is that they can sometimes go off on their own and this can lead to further issues for your organisation. By keeping them involved, this risk can be mitigated.

Have someone keeping an eye on the emergent groups that are forming on social media. Observe them and decide which ones you can assist. It is important to consider when resourcing, who will be your ‘online community liaison officers’? Who will connect with the emergent groups when they form and help facilitate them?
Communicating effectively

Communicating in a time of emergency can be quite different to during ‘normal business’, people are seeking more information, more regularly and are doing so in heightened emotional states.

Timeliness

A timely response is everything. If you don’t respond quickly the conversation moves on and you lose the opportunity to have your say.

Regular, timely responses will help build confidence and trust among your audience. Still communicate even if you don’t really have anything yet to communicate! “We’re on it” “We’re doing X” “We will let you know when we know more” etc.

Keep releasing smaller updates in between larger updates and re-release key information at regular intervals, as older updated may get lost from the public’s awareness.

Tell the community how often you intend to communicate and provide updates, that way it is predictable, reliable and they know you are there.

Transparency and honesty

There is no room for ambiguity or positive spin during an emergency.

Try to eliminate the ‘government-speak’ in your posts/communications. Talk in language that the community can understand easily. Visual content is king.

Consider what information people need in order to make informed decisions and focus the information released towards this, and be brutally honest in your communications. Brutally honest.

Use hashtags

Hashtags are a useful way to aggregate or focus information and conversations around key topics. They can help people find relevant information about a particular issue from multiple sources at once.

It’s a good idea to have some pre-prepared hashtags along with your pre-approved comments, however its also wise to check what hashtags are already being used by the community.

There are a variety of different ways you may use hashtags and you can also use multiple, such as:

- To focus information around particular geographic locations (eg #bnefloods)
- To focus information about what you want people to do (eg #floodreport, #floodwarning)
- To focus information around particular services (eg #volunteers, #reliefcentre)
Psychological first aid

People affected by disasters will experience a range of early reactions (physical, psychological, emotional, behavioural) and these may affect how they wish to engage with you online. Some people may just want to chat, others will want lots of information, and others may express negative emotions and behaviours.

Psychological first aid is an approach to helping people affected by an emergency. It involves helping people to feel safe, connected to others, calm and hopeful, able to access emotional and social support, and able to help themselves.

It is important to keep in mind five key elements when moderating and responding to your online audience:

Promote safety
Promote calm
Promote connectedness
Promote self efficacy
Promote hope

For more information, refer to the Red Cross’ guide: ‘Psychological First Aid’ here: http://www.redcross.org.au/files/Psychological_First_Aid_An_Australian_Guide.pdf

Look after yourself

Managing social media during an emergency is fast-paced, high-pressure and for some can be quite emotionally taxing. Remember, you must look after yourself in order to help others effectively.

Be aware of how you are feeling and if you are tired, angry, upset, stressed, under the influence of alcohol or not in a calm and clear mind frame take a break and let someone else take over.

Do not underestimate the support you may need, from family/friends/colleagues to bring you food and refreshments, provide support at home while you are focussed on the emergency, or even emotional support and encouragement, and don't be afraid to ask for it.
Currency and prioritisation

The downside of the speed and reach of social media is that during an emergency the proliferation of messages and information can become overwhelming and hard to keep up with. In addition, there is the risk that out of date, inaccurate information can be circulated for hours on the basis of social media shares.

It is important to put practices into place to help you and your audiences access the right and most current information. This may include:

- Time and date-stamping your posts (don't rely on the social media channels' time stamping as people often overlook this)
- Release information at regular intervals (ie every 30 mins) and tell your audience to expect this
- Re-release important information

Integrate your social and website

During an emergency social media can be so awash with messages that it’s hard for the community to work out what is current, important and reliable.

Integrating live feeds from your key social media channels (and perhaps those of key agencies) into your website splash-page, or a social media hub linked to your splash-page, can be a great way to help your community.

For more information, the following article outlines the City of Brisbane’s approach:
‘All that I'm hearing from you is white noise’: social media aggregation in emergency response, Tracy Whitelaw, Dr Donna Henson, Bond University

See more at: https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-29-04-10#sthash.TIqzj8IH.dpuf
After a crisis

Communicate the recovery process

Don’t forget that it’s just as important to keep the communication up during the recovery phase as it is during the immediate emergency response phase, particularly for local government as this is where it has an even greater role.

Listen to the community and help them with recovery, but remember to leverage your emerging communities and support them to lead the process.

Depending on what stage you are at in the recovery process, you may however consider starting to transition away from 24/7 social media monitoring – make sure you remember to inform your community of any changes so they know what to expect.

Don’t forget your website splash-page

An effective splash-page doesn’t simply disappear once the emergency response phase is over. Responding to the emergency is just the beginning for the community, and they will need just as much guidance and support during the recovery phase.

Use your splash-page to connect your community to key support services and agencies, direct volunteers to the areas of most need, and most importantly keep the community updated on what recovery activity council is undertaking.

Give thanks and nurture your community

If your social media activity has been a success it is likely that you will have benefitted from insights from your community and also grown your following.

Where information sourced from the public has helped to create a positive outcome, remember to thank them for their contributions. Take the time to develop some ‘success stories’ and publish them online or create reports of the level of activity to show people how they contributed. This will continue to build confidence and engagement amongst your audience for the future.

When the time is right, it may also be appropriate to make use of the event to promote your preparedness messages. Encourage your audience to share their experiences and use it as a topic to generate more discussion and engagement.
Review and report

After the emergency situation is over, it’s incredibly important to evaluate the success of your social media activity. Go back to the objectives that you originally set in your Social Media Strategy and measure how well you did:

- How far did your messages reach? (likes, shares, comments)
- Which channels had the highest levels of engagement?
- What types of messages received the most engagement?
- How much positive and negative feedback did you receive?
- Did your followers increase?
- How well did you coordinate social media with other activities (website, media etc)?
- Were you able to effectively mitigate misinformation?
- Which users were your key allies, were there any that worked against you?
- How well did you feedback intelligence from your community to your emergency response team or other agencies?

It’s also important that you include feedback from your key agencies, emergency management staff and community as part of this evaluation.

Share and learn

Once you have conducted your evaluation and used it to inform and update your social media strategy, make sure you share your insights broadly with other organisations.

The 2015 QUT Report “Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations” recommends four key approaches:

- Inter-organisation social media staff exchanges – that bring together Government, emergency services, media and key community organisations
- Mentoring – on-site visits by social media or emergency management mentors so that support can be tailored to organisational needs
- Gatherings – annual conferences to share best-practice or more practical, regular regional gatherings to focus on local issues/risks
- Discussion groups – whether in person or online, connecting professionals from across the state or country to share knowledge and support each other.
Common mistakes

While it is important to be aware of what does work in social media when using it during a crisis, there are also a number of lessons to be learned from what doesn’t work.

There are a significant number of case studies available that outline situations where things have gone wrong in social media and how organisations have failed in their response.

Reading these can highlight good lessons and can support the need to plan and put social media processes and governance in place early.

Simply Google search for ‘social media fail’ or ‘social media case studies’ and there will be plenty from various organisations on what not to do on social media.

Leaving the education process too late

If you do not start educating internally on social media use, it will be too late when a crisis arrives. It is important to set up your channels and build your community ahead of any crisis, as trying to engage successfully during a crisis is too late.

Often the best way to do this is to demand a place at the table during crisis planning and communication planning within your organisation. If you can identify a few champions internally who are in significant positions, getting their approval and understanding can pave the way in getting internal buy-in for social media.

The key message is the cliché that you can’t influence a conversation if you are not part of it.

Educate early and educate widely across your organisation. It will assist you should a crisis occur.

Lack of Transparency

Another aspect of social media that doesn’t work is being guarded and not showing full transparency in your communications.

While there are always going to be times when the minimum amount of information can be shared, the overarching strategy should be to try and be as transparent as possible. Speak in straightforward truths that show the community you are giving them information as you obtain it.

Keep your internal approval processes in place, but push for quick answers, even if those are holding statements. They should be honest, to the point and transparent about the next steps.
Misunderstanding your Resources

When it comes to crisis, you need to ensure you have enough resources to cover something that could potentially roll on for a number of days or weeks.

Never assume one or two people can run your social media in a crisis, this won't work over a sustained period.

If you can, have a roster ready to go as soon as a crisis hits. You should, where possible, work on a three-person roster. This gives you the opportunity to either run 12 hour shifts, or 8 hour shifts as needed.

By having an approved roster ready to go, you can simply swap in and out names as needed based on your available resources.

Where possible, scale your social media skills and resources to the wider team, who can provide backup as needed.

Keep in mind though; a simple solution isn't to always place your intern or most junior staff member in charge of your social media. If you wouldn't trust them to speak for you in front of a camera, don't put them on your social media channels.

They must be social media professionals, preferably with media training also.
Appendix A - Template website splash-page

Event title - Emergency Information

This is a quick link page activated during emergencies only.

For emergencies call 000.

ABC Emergency

Police

Government of South Australia

Alert SA

SES

MFS

CFS

Recovery

Latest updates from Council click here.
Further resources

**All that I’m hearing from you is white noise**: social media aggregation in emergency response
Tracy Whitelaw, Dr Donna Henson, Bond University - See more at: https://ajem.infoservices.com.au/items/AJEM-29-04-10#sthash.TIqzj8lH.dpuf

**Support Frameworks for the Use of Social Media by Emergency Management Organisations**
#qldfloods and @QPSMedia: Crisis Communication on Twitter in the 2011 South East Queensland Floods

Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess, Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology and Kate Crawford and Frances Shaw, Journalism and Media Research Centre, University of New South Wales. See more at: http://www.cci.edu.au/floodsreport.pdf

The role of social media as psychological first aid as a support to community resilience building: A Facebook study from ‘Cyclone Yasi Update’

Social media, crisis communication and community-led response and recovery: 
An Australian case study


Psychological First Aid: An Australian guide to supporting people affected by disaster.

Hashtag Standards for Emergencies

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, October 2014 - see more at https://app.box.com/s/yvobt4n9wptqa8sd0887

Social Media 101 Guide for Councils - Social Media Policy Template

Social Media ‘how-to’ user guides for different channels
Available from the LGA – email marketing@lga.sa.gov.au