

'Connect!' Workshop

By Katrina Beard, Education Research and Training Team.

Recent disaster events in Australia and internationally have demonstrated the importance of social media, not only in delivering vital information to the community during emergency events but in building relationships during preparedness and recovery.

In 2009, AEMI identified the use of social media in emergency management as a priority for our research agenda and started planning a workshop on social media for early 2011.

During the planning phase of the workshop, the devastating New Zealand earthquakes, the 2010/11 flooding in Queensland and Victoria, and Cyclone Yasi in far north Queensland emphasised the increasing importance of social media for connecting people in disaster events.

In February 2011, the Ministerial Council for Police and Emergency Management – Emergency Management (MCPEM-EM) held an extraordinary meeting to discuss priorities for building the nation's resilience in light of the unprecedented number, severity and scale of natural disaster events over summer.

MCPEM-EM agreed to eleven priorities including:

- convene a forum to consider new and emerging technologies that could be harnessed to assist with preparedness, response and recovery to natural disasters, with an initial focus on floods, and
- give particular attention to the emerging role of social media, as part of the work on communicating with and educating people about risks under the COAG National Strategy for Disaster Resilience (2011).

Workshop participants

The Connect! Workshop was ideally placed to bring people together to share their experiences and to offer a wide perspective on what happened, what worked and in some instances the critical challenges of using new media in disaster events. Presenters included representatives from:

Queensland Police Service

- Cyclone Yasi citizen-driven Facebook page
- Volunteering Queensland
- Green Cross Australia

St John Ambulance

- CFA Victoria
- Bushfire Connect Ushahidi Project
- OESC Victoria

University of Western Sydney

- Yammer Inc
- Telstra
- Attorney General's Dept - NSCDD

During the workshop a live Twitter feed, displayed behind the speakers, ran hot with comments, ideas, and quotes while workshop presentations were Live Streamed on the website.

Emergent themes

Collaboration

A major emphasis during the workshop was social media as a two-way medium. Once an agency starts using social media tools, they will be inviting a dialogue with their communities. For agencies the real challenge will be to move beyond seeing social media as another broadcast tool to recognising that social media invites the community to be partners and collaborators.

Openness

As information is available so rapidly from a wider range of sources, official sources have lost their ability to control information about disaster events. If the speed and granularity of information available from official sources isn't meeting community expectations, they will seek information elsewhere. Agencies will need to either learn to utilise more rapid communications or lose their ability to inform the public.

Empowerment

The rise of digital volunteers, the willingness of communities to share information with the emergency services (and the media), the public use of social networks to self-organise assistance to affected communities, and the ability of communities to help themselves with the use of good, current and local information are driven by access to social media.

Summary

Lively discussions about the potential and challenges of social media in emergency management had most participants agreeing that, while there are certainly risks for organisations, the potential for better engagement, better intelligence, stronger relationships and enhanced disaster resilience, make social media a vital tool across the sector.