Social Media + Emergency Management 2011 Camp (#SMEM11)

Through the emergence of social media technology over the past decade, individuals have experienced a fundamental shift in how they interact with the world, where they interact with it, and the speed at which interaction takes place. The combination of technology and community holds promise for a great many things, including emergency management and disaster response. Recent crisis events have demonstrated the transformational effect of this technology with respect to emergency management and disaster response. What this promise looks like was the topic of discussion at the Social Media in Emergency Management (SMEM) 2011 Camp, an event hosted by the National Emergency Management Association Mid-Year Conference and the SMEM Initiative in collaboration with CrisisCommons.¹ CNA provided a research team to support data collection and white paper development.

In the past two years, much has been made by individuals in the response community of the effect of new technologies—including social media—on international disaster response efforts; receiving somewhat less attention has been the effect of these technologies on domestic initiatives. On March 24, 2011, over 150 individuals within the domestic response community and with various levels of technology expertise convened for the first time for a day of learning and discussion on the value of social media and emergent technologies, best practices, and challenges relevant to the adoption and use of technology in emergency response. Attendees represented a broad cross-section of the emergency response community and included representatives from FEMA (Administrator Fugate and Deputy Administrator Serino), the Red Cross, Twitter, state and local emergency management agencies, Canadian emergency management, the private sector, and various volunteer technology communities (VTCs). In the spirit of the technology under discussion, topics for the breakout sessions were “crowdsourced” from the participants and included the following: Policy, Getting Started (Social Media 101), Community Building, Situational Awareness, and “Running your Shop.”

One of the primary objectives of the conference was to capture discussion from the event and develop a white paper to highlight best practices, challenges, future engagement, and training opportunities. The white paper is scheduled for release to coincide with the June 2011 Urban Areas Security Initiative Conference in San Francisco, CA. Below is a discussion of the initial findings.

Initial Findings

Camp discussions revealed that while there has been a great deal of progress in the use and integration of social media and related technologies in emergency response, there still remains a conceptual aspiration as to how these technologies can be used to improve response in both crises and steady-state situations. Currently, these technologies are predominately used by Public Information Officers (PIOs) to provide awareness externally by disseminating information to the public, and internally by monitoring open-source information streams. However, participants expressed a desire to see these technologies used consistently across all spectrums of the response apparatus to leverage open data and the participatory community. The gap between the current state and the desired state of practice persists because of legitimate concerns and challenges that emergency managers (EMs) face in fostering

¹ The SMEM Initiative is an informal network of emergency management practitioners who seek to explore best practices and bridge social media in emergency management. SMEM seeks to build a common understanding and “experience exchange” to support the inclusion of social media, public data, and technology innovation to support objectives of emergency management to prepare for, respond to, recover from, and mitigate against disasters.
adoption and creating internal and external buy-in. Participants also observed that many of the challenges are interrelated and that improvements or solutions in one area can set the stage for progress in other areas. The following issues particularly resonated among camp participants:

- **Resources**: To make full use of new technologies in an effective manner requires an investment and commitment of resources to that end. This commitment is currently not found across the majority of response agencies. Where advances have occurred they have largely been made by individual champions of these technologies who see value and have pushed for their use. The lack of institutional support limits use to convenience, inherently stunting its development as a tool for emergency management. In lieu of funding for increased personnel and training, EMs who use these technologies have had to assume an inordinate workload or rely on VTCs that have demonstrated the ability to curate, filter, and synthesize critical response information.

- **Policy and Guidance**: The lack of clearly defined policy and guidance around privacy, liability, reliability of information, and appropriate use has made many EMs hesitant to use these new technologies. Without a defined role for use of these technologies within the federal emergency response framework, their use has been limited primarily to the PIO role. Development of policies for use across all response components will need to be supported with guidance and best practices at the federal level, which will help remove hesitancy, provide templates for implementation, and increase adoption at the state and local levels. Additionally, as VTCs are increasingly used to help augment response personnel, volunteer liability and integration within the response structure will need to be addressed.

- **Engagement and Community Building**: Establishing a sustained dialogue between citizens and responders through new technologies will create value around their use. Not only is awareness created on both ends, but trust between the participating actors and can be developed and leveraged during response. Community building before a crisis can both leverage the community as a *force multiplier* and help manage public expectations around the use of new technologies during response, which EMs cited as a concern. Support for the development of (and EM participation in) continued learning opportunities such as the SMEM 2011 Camp will help to disseminate best practices and to develop a common understanding of how the response community can leverage these technologies for sustained constituent engagement.

- **Demonstrating Value and Reliability to Others**: Several individuals who attended the camp walked in as skeptics but left ready to go be champions for technology adoption within their organizations. An exchange of experiences helped sway these individuals; however, it still remains difficult to demonstrate value beyond anecdotal evidence. A lack of measurement with respect to impact and reliability of these tools in real-world response events leave many unaware or unconvinced of their value. Initiatives that will allow for increased data collection and assessment of technology and its use in response will be critical in creating buy-in at all levels of response.

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