To explore the expanding use of social media in emergency communications, the American Public Health Association, Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., The George Washington University, The International Association of Emergency Managers and The National Association of Government Communicators sponsored the “Expert Roundtable on Social Media and Risk Communications During Times of Crisis: Strategic Challenges and Opportunities,” held on March 31 in Washington, D.C.

Social media is not only an effective tool for monitoring and engaging public discourse during the crisis process, but also enables the cultural shift regarding how the public views its role as an empowered contributor. Emergency management and crisis communications have become more participatory. This has been illustrated repeatedly — including by the speed with which people shared information (and misinformation) on Twitter during the H1N1 flu crisis and the media’s reliance on victims’ mobile-enabled status updates during the Mumbai terrorist attack last November.

At the roundtable, panelists shared experience and insights into how their organizations leverage social media platforms to empower and manage public outreach. The following mini case studies were gleaned from presentations given by representatives from federal agencies, national organizations and the media.

The CDC’s “Tip of the Week”

In responding to public health emergencies, Nathan Huebner, emergency communications specialist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said that his organization combines risk communication principles with the Web’s usability for communicating health messages to the public. The CDC posts the weather-related “Tip of the Week” on its home page, and also sends a weekly tip to thousands of subscribers via e-mail, text message and Twitter.

Additionally, the Web site provides disaster preparedness e-cards that site visitors can send to friends and family. For imminent disasters, the CDC makes public service announcements to mainstream media, which are now offered as podcasts on its Web site — and also in video and audio format with closed captioning. When a disaster strikes, the CDC offers a version of its emergency site for mobile phones. Users can download preparedness and recovery information in a simple text version.

By encouraging people to sign up for “Tip of the Week” messages, the CDC has created a base of subscribers that it can reach when an event occurs. When Hurricane Ike struck the Gulf Coast of Texas last September, the CDC sent out regular weekly messages. They also released unscheduled alerts about power outage safety and evacuation information to people in the affected areas. Social media has enabled the CDC to prepare the public for emergencies and deal with the aftermath.
According to Andrew Wilson, Web manager at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), peanuts are ubiquitous. So, this past January’s recall effort was especially challenging. HHS used a two-pronged approach: raise public awareness and provide a mechanism for the public to differentiate between tainted and safe products. The FDA’s existing database allows consumers to search products by UPC code, product and brand to learn whether a particular product is recalled.

To raise awareness of the issue, the agency created the HHS Peanut Product Recall Blog, with cross-agency posts, and leveraged a successful blog and network of bloggers at the CDC. The message was also delivered via a widget, Twitter and online videos on HHS Web sites and YouTube channels, whose code enables viewers to embed the information within their own blogs and Web sites.

Early in the process, a blogger criticized the FDA for not delivering the message via social media. HHS sent him a tweet explaining the actions that it was taking, and the blogger wrote two posts praising the agency’s efforts. After HHS conducted an interview with him via Twitter, the blogger posted it on an online version of a trade journal. HHS used social media to turn a critic into a supporter.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a perception problem because the public does not fully understand what the agency does, according to John Shea, public information officer for new media. FEMA coordinates the federal response to disasters with other federal agencies and state and local partners. The agency keeps the message consistent by using blogs, Twitter and YouTube to communicate.

Each of FEMA’s regions has its own Twitter account with local partners, media and interested communities. FEMA pushes information to the regions, and the local officials disseminate it. Bloggers and Twitter users then spread FEMA’s message. The agency incorporates data sharing in its communications model as well. FEMA’s Web site has videos that can be posted on other Web sites. In addition, FEMA also maintains a network of videographers called Disaster System Reservists — and many have their own YouTube channels. Whether it is the Department of Homeland Security secretary talking about how the floods are affecting the tribal nations, or a homeowner thanking volunteers for their help, these videos enable FEMA officials to consistently interact with the public.
The Red Cross’s disaster Flickrs

The American Red Cross uses social media to empower the public to either seek or give help during a disaster, says Laura Howe, the agency’s senior director of public affairs. The Red Cross helps accomplish these goals through the photo-sharing site Flickr.

During Hurricane Ike in September 2007, the Web site averaged 4,000 Flickr views per day. Among the viewers were CNN, Yahoo! News and local newspapers — many used the photos when reporting on the events.

The Red Cross utilizes YouTube and its 10,000 Twitter followers to distribute information during a disaster, and it manages a Facebook page to gather and receive feedback. It also uses Utterli, a micro-blogging service with an emphasis on mobile communications, to disseminate information to radio stations and bloggers.

While evacuating Galveston Island during Hurricane Ike, a field volunteer called the agency’s emergency 800-number with information to help residents safely leave the area. The audio component made it possible to hear sirens and other noise, thus recreating the experience for listeners. The volunteer-led organization finds social media so beneficial that it has trained 150 public affairs volunteers to use these tools to convey information during disasters.

NPR’s newsgathering via tags

Andy Carvin, senior strategist at National Public Radio’s (NPR) social media desk, wanted to leverage what bloggers across Southeast Asia accomplished with their Tsunami Help blog in December 2004: circulate the information online that people had gathered during a disaster. He found that social media and tagging were the best way to do that.

Before Hurricane Gustav reached the U.S. mainland last August, Carvin wanted to create a tag-based Web site to collect information from people’s tweets, Utterli voice mails, Flickr photos and other sites that allow keyword searches to create Google maps. He sought volunteers via Twitter, and the Web site was functioning within 48 hours.

For the 2008 presidential election, Carvin created NPR’s Vote Report, which provided voting-related information. Carvin worked with techPresident.com bloggers and asked for information in the form of tweets and text messages. He also asked contributors to provide zip codes or addresses to create maps that indicated where voter irregularities might be occurring. The five reporters working on the story had thousands of volunteers providing information. Carvin used the same process on Inauguration Day, with users submitting more than 40,000 photos, videos and tweets. Social media tools and tags made it possible to gather and organize vast amounts of data into compelling stories.

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sound the alarm or to calm the public. But for others, there are questions to consider before agreeing to participate. Is there a direct impact on your company? Is there a genuine threat to the people who consume your service or product? How will you feel about seeing your brand associated with this story when it is printed?

**Encourage the use of reliable sources**

The age of social media has provided a tremendous opportunity for real-time public relations but has also blurred the line between legitimate journalism and questionable sources. Encourage responsible consumption by directing the media—and the public—to your own Web resources and other sites that you know are reliable.

At the height of the H1N1 scare, UCLA’s Web site included information conveyed through Q-and-As, video interviews and links to public health agencies. And the communications department e-mailed faculty and staff to dispel rumors and mitigate hysteria.

**Practice early and often**

Clearly, it isn’t possible to train for every specific type of crisis. But many of the lessons learned in crisis media training are universal. If you can’t bring in a professional trainer, then at least designate key spokespeople and develop protocol. Remember that reporters are more interested in relevant experts than in general company spokespeople. One final thought: Media training almost always occurs too late once the crisis has occurred.

Is it still possible to control the message?

Just as social media has changed the communications profession, it has shifted how risk communicators handle messaging, public outreach and response. Before blogs and Twitter, it was easier to control message flow: A small number of official sources provided information to the public via a limited number of media channels. In today’s environment, citizens not only have access to multiple sources of information, but they also provide it.

For example, during the terrorist activity in Mumbai last November, the first sources of news, video and photos were not from mainstream media, but from victims using their mobile phones to upload information on YouTube, Twitter and Flickr. Last year, throughout the Southern California fire season, citizens shared the latest information via community-edited Google maps and Flickr.

Given social media’s immediacy, how can communicators manage information? The answer lies in collaborating with the public. Social media brings many challenges to crisis communications—as well as immense opportunities. Crisis communicators and emergency managers are now part of a broader conversation. They can enhance their organizations’ ability to gather accurate field data by partnering with social networks in crisis situations. By providing data in a social-media-friendly format, organizations can expand their information networks by identifying who is using their data on various blogs, wikis or Twitter feeds.

However, collaborating with the public and partnering with social networks requires ceding control of messages that are now subject to unprecedented levels of public scrutiny. Today, an effective public outreach campaign must be far more conversational than before—and content must be shared, not pushed. Emergency managers need to participate in and lead such conversations, rather than simply talk at an audience.

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Tim L. Tinker (left) is a senior associate and co-director of Booz Allen Hamilton’s Center of Excellence for Risk and Crisis Communications. As a senior strategist, Tinker works with government agencies and private industries on their most challenging communications problems.

Michael Dumlao (center) is a senior consultant at Booz Allen Hamilton specializing in creative multimedia design and social media strategy. Dumlao has designed Web sites, print collateral and social media for clients in the defense, homeland security, and civil markets.

Grant McLaughlin (right), a principal with Booz Allen Hamilton, manages professionals in the strategic area of organization change. He has more than 15 years of experience in strategic communications, change management/change communications, marketing, public education and stakeholder outreach.