Usefulness of smartphone apps vs social media during disaster situations

Practitioners referred in particular to the development of smartphone apps for emergency and disaster situations, where citizens can use them to take photos or to inform emergency services about an emergency or disaster situation. However, some practitioners felt that social media platforms like Facebook may have made such apps redundant, and that greater focus should be placed on social media strategies: "We should succeed in fidelizing social media users rather than using many apps… improving the presence of "sentinels" over the territory" (G2; R - see source document for full reference). "The Service of Civil Protection in Sesto was the first to launch an app that allowed citizens to send a referenced photo to civil protection service at any time of the day. This system has been surpassed by Facebook. There're are [Facebook] groups of inhabitants of Sesto, but these groups exist in every municipality, that have tens of thousands of users" (G2; R). Smartphones and tablets were seen to have additional benefits in disaster situations, as citizens are easily able to carry them and use them to receive information in the early stages of disaster relief: "I live in the area of the earthquake in Emilia, we had the quake at 4 am and we all went out in the street, and we all took our tablets and smartphones with us. The municipal offices after 2 hours were able to give out all information and directions about the emergency on its website" (G1; R3). However, social media and speed of communication by citizens were also perceived as posing additional challenges to organizations in disaster situations, as they may have difficulties in effectively managing how information about the disaster is shared with citizens, thus making disaster situations hard to control. In particular, the practitioners had a strong sense of self-criticism in their abilities: "Let me tell you, we had a reality bite with the lack of our communication skills, as social media had already spread the word before the fire department arrived. News and images were spreading everywhere and the situation is hard to manage when you lose control" (G2; R3).

Applicable to:

Stakeholders: Communication

Disaster Phases: Response

Types of Actors Concerned: National civil protection body, Local authorities, Media

Hazards: Natural hazards, Man-made non-intentional hazards or emergency situations, Man-made intentional hazards

Recommendations:
- Social media can be a useful alternative communication channel in all stages of disaster management
- The use of new technologies (e.g. Bluetooth) can improve communication strategies in disaster management situations
- Use cultural factors to improve the effectiveness of disaster communication

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Source

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