



SOCIAL MEDIA AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT- A CASE STUDY OF KERALA FLOODS 2018

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the advent of social networks, the world of communication has been growing by leaps and bounds. Social media revolution brought about a new wave of change, which has phenomenally changed the way we have been communicating. Today, social media has become an inseparable part of the lives of billions around the world. The pivotal role of social media in crisis communication and disaster management is of utmost significance at a time when we are witnessing these new forms of communication being used as effective communication tools to curb, control and facilitate rescue and relief operations during times of crisis. Social networks, with their mass appeal, tremendous reach and the incredible ability to disseminate information on a real time basis, have emerged as a game changer in the face of natural disasters and crisis situations. The paper is a contextual analysis and study of the recent events in the world of social media set in the context of Kerala floods 2018.

KEY WORDS: Social media, disaster management, crisis communication, Kerala floods 2018

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper on social media and disaster management intends to seek answers for few relevant topics in the world of crisis communication today.

The objective of the study is to:

- Understand the role of social media in disaster management and crisis communication
- Study the transformation of social media from being a mere medium of fun and frolic to a responsible platform that aids social change and fosters development

METHODOLOGY

The method of analysis used for this particular study is 'case study' method. The study encompasses a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events and their resultant impacts. The case analyzed in this study is Kerala floods 2018, which witnessed social media coming into the rescue of the state when it witnessed the worst catastrophe of the recent times. The social networking sites considered primarily for the analysis of this study are Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and Twitter.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has the invincible potential of on demand and real time access of content anytime and anywhere making them one of the most powerful and influential communication tools of our times. Social networks facilitate uninterrupted flow of information and content to a wider audience, helps to interact with

the ones on ground during times of a crisis, get a realistic picture of the situation, improve collaboration and create awareness. Social networks empower the affected population and the ones associated with them to take control of the situation and use the power of these new forms of communication to aid rescue and rehabilitation processes.

When Nepal was hit by the devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake in 2015, Facebook came up with the revolutionary 'safety check' feature. The features helped to locate Facebook users in the affected region using the city listed on their profile or by tracking their last place of login. Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg remarked that people always want to know that their loved ones are safe, when a calamity hits. It is truly during moments like these that being able to connect matters the most.

Kerala floods 2018

Kerala, the Southern state of India most popularly known as 'God's own country', witnessed one of the worst natural calamities in the form of devastating floods, which completely destroyed the state and its infrastructure. The floods, which hit the state in the months of July and August took the lives of many people and displaced over a million creating absolute chaos and disorder in the region. It has been the worst floods in Kerala in nearly a century, leaving all 14 districts of the state on red alert. According to government records, one sixth of the total population was directly hit by the floodwaters and related incidents like landslides and for the first time in the history of the state 35 out of the 54 dams were opened, exposing the people of the region, to one of the most tragic calamities ever.



Image courtesy: The Times of India

SOCIAL MEDIA ON A MISSION

Our country's National Disaster Relief Force launched its biggest ever rescue operation in the state, evacuating over 10,000 people facing toughest of situations and tackling numerous challenges. The Indian army and the navy were also deployed to assist the rescue operations, but they had unexpected assistance that too a highly powerful one in the form of social media communication.

Soon after the disaster struck, people from all parts of the world took to social media to get real time updates from the state and also to coordinate search, rescue and food and medical aid distribution efforts and effectively reach out to the ones in need. Social media was used incredibly well as a mobilizing tool to send help in different ways. The online space was flooded with focused messages that helped tremendously in collection, distribution and transportation of relief materials and other supplies.

The state witnessed help pouring in from all corners of the world, beyond all borders and boundaries and experienced a sense of awe-inspiring unity that was fueled largely by social networking platforms. Numerous avenues were opened through which people could reach out and help and social networks consistently played the role of a catalyst and mobilizer in speeding up the crisis communication processes.

How social media aided rescue and relief

Kerala is celebrated for its literacy rates and now also for its digital literacy making it the first digital state in the country. The state is treading at a rapid pace towards highly evolved digital landscape with the government announcing path breaking initiatives like the Kerala Fibre Optic Network (K-FON) which is all geared up to become a reality by 2020. K-FON is an ambitious project, which aims to provide robust network connectivity across the state and establish Internet access as a basic right of the people from the region. The social media landscape of Kerala has always been highly dynamic and exuberant.

In the early days of flood relief normal masses harnessed the power of social media to play a commendable role in relief and rescue efforts and soon they were joined by bigger players which included brands, corporates, charity organizations, NGOs and celebrities who tapped the potential of these new forms of communication by reaching out to their massive number of followers on the virtual platforms. Kerala government, with the aid of software engineers established the web interface www.keralarescue.in, which also played a significant role during the floods.

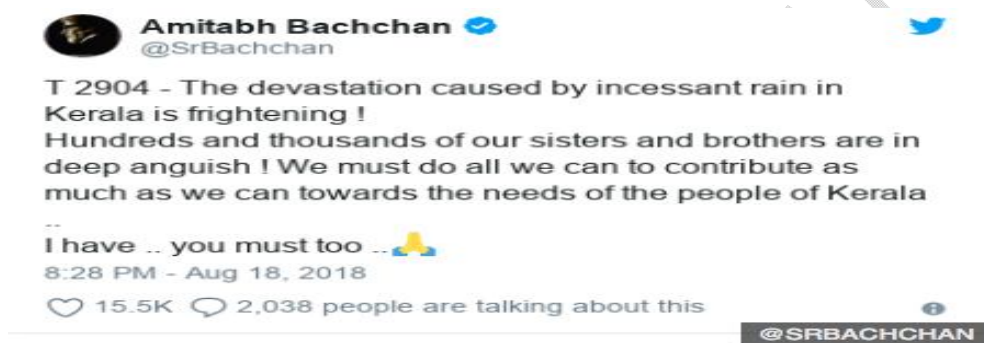


Image courtesy: Twitter

People converted their personal and professional social pages into virtual control rooms that effectively monitored, mapped and addressed the requirements of the ones affected and those who were in desperate need of assistance. As the flood situation became severe and water levels started rising uncontrollably, it was becoming increasingly difficult to manage relief camps and there was scarcity of relief materials. Groups and communities were formed on platforms like Whatsapp and Facebook, with volunteering groups taking up the initiative to support and assist government initiatives.

EFFECTIVE USE OF HASHTAGS

The hashtags **#KeralaFloods**, **#KeralaFloodRelief**, **#DoForKerala** and the likes were trending across all social platforms making it easier for those looking for help and also those wanting to help. Massive supplies were brought in by the public at various spots located at places less affected by floods, which acted as central collection points from which materials were categorized and redirected to various relief camps as per the demand. The highly effective communication between collection points and public, aided by volunteers using social media turned out to be one of the most successful relief and rescue operation models, which ensured that people brought only things that were required in specific camps. This helped immensely in controlling wastage of supplies of all forms including food, clothes and medicines.

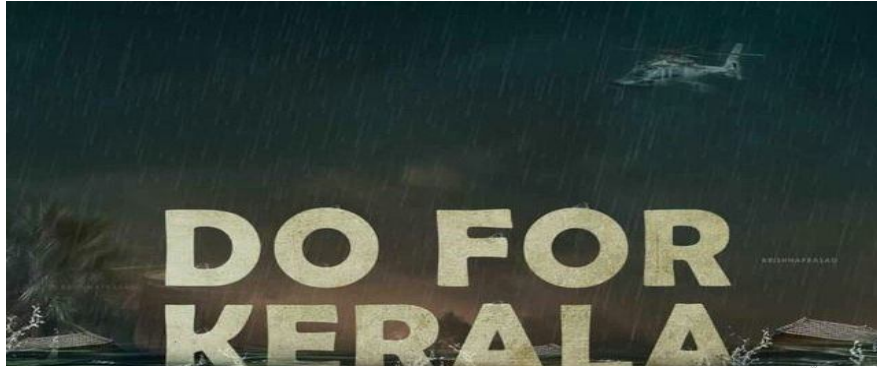


Image courtesy: Change.org

Even when it came to fund raising and seeking financial support for Chief Minister's flood relief initiative, social media ensured that financial assistance reached the government and the flood affected state not just from India, but cutting across all borders. The hashtag **#ThankYouUAE** also became remarkably popular on all virtual platforms, with people thanking the Arab nation for its thoughtful and timely gesture as financial aid for the flood ravaged state.

Not just the citizens and the well wishers, but the government of Kerala itself ensured that social networks were tapped to their fullest potential to ensure the rebuilding and revival of the state was happening at an inspirational pace. Social media bridged the communication gaps between the authorities and people and fortified the efforts to contain the unfortunate situation. These virtual platforms succeeded in convincing the masses for greater participation by highlighting and acknowledging their contributions and by consistently providing quick and efficient mechanisms of donations. Meaningful and timely social media intervention undoubtedly helped the state overcome the disaster at an unimaginable time frame by offering systematic natural disaster management communication.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that social media can effectively address the situation by educating the people about the calamity, and by creating awareness about prevention and self help during times of distress and bereavement. Taking into account our experiences and encounters, it is understood that regardless of the nature of the disaster, social media channels can successfully serve as an integral and crucial component when it comes to crisis response. Social media provides numerous channels and opportunities to engage people during times of emergency by both disseminating information to the masses and accessing or sourcing information from them. During such times, people are exposed to massive amounts of information and there is a potential risk of misinformation, but online users are usually very swift to pin point and correct errors and update status of various operations, thus making social networking platforms a self regulatory medium of communication.

Beyond improving preparedness, generating awareness and facilitating relief and rescue operations, social media can also be used as a rich source of content for social scientists and act as a repertoire for information to have a better and deeper sense of understanding of the disaster post the crisis. The presence of social networks now has a profound and compelling impact on the way people prepare, plan and recover from disasters. The presence of 24*7 news cycle works in everyone's advantage redefining the way communication has been traditionally taking place making us witness paradigm shifts in our communication landscape.

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