

Written Testimony of

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Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Emergency
Preparedness, Response and Communication**

**Emergency MGMT 2.0: How #SocialMedia & New Tech are Transforming
Preparedness, Response, & Recovery #Disasters #Part1 #Privatesector**

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Introduction

Chairwoman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for calling this timely and important hearing. It is a pleasure and an honor to appear before you today to discuss how the Internet and social media and are transforming how Americans prepare, respond and recover when disaster strikes.

My name is Michael Beckerman, and I am the President and CEO of the Internet Association, a trade organization comprised of 17 leading Internet companies across the globe, including AOL, Airbnb, Amazon.com, ebay, Expedia, Facebook, Google, IAC, LinkedIn, Monster, Path, Rackspace, Salesforce.com, SurveyMonkey, TripAdvisor, Yahoo, and Zynga. Our members have been on the forefront of efforts to leverage new technology and communication platforms to inform the public before, during and after a disaster, and to facilitate recovery and reconstruction efforts in the aftermath. We deeply appreciate the opportunity to share the perspective of our membership with the Committee today.

The rise of social media, “crowd sourcing” and the “share economy” has revolutionized how we interact with our friends, family, fellow citizens and government. Communicating during a disaster is now an interactive conversation. Millions of minds converge to solve problems, seek out answers and disseminate vital information. Important news can be shared with millions, and by millions, quickly and efficiently. The social web is challenging emergency managers, government agencies and aid organizations to adapt time-honored expertise with real-time information from the public (Please see Exhibit A). In short, the convergence of social networks and mobile has thrown the old response playbook out the window.

Then and Now: Evolution of Technology in Disaster Response

The power and promise of the Internet was on full display in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, one of the most devastating natural disasters this country has ever experienced. When this catastrophic storm ravaged the city of New Orleans and its surrounding areas, it claimed many lives, displaced hundreds of thousands of people, and left billions of dollars worth of damage with its wreckage.

During an emergency, information is the most valuable commodity. After the storm, the Internet played an important role in mitigating the breakdown of communication that is typical during times of disaster. According to the Pew Research Center, about 50% of all Internet users received news about the hurricane not only from mainstream media websites but also from blogs.¹ A quarter of online users shared e-mails or instant messages about the storm while others used the Internet to check on someone's safety.²

The water's recession revealed the true extent of the devastation, which inspired the rest of the country and the world to make monetary contributions critical to rebuilding the city. In just a few short weeks after the storm, private donations neared about \$2.7 billion.³ In reaching this record setting level, the Internet served as an important outlet for relief donations with about 13 million Americans turning to online sources to provide donations.⁴

That was 2005 – only a year after Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook, before Twitter came into existence and even before smartphones became as ubiquitous as they are today. Since then, our member companies have continued to innovate, achieving significant advancements in online tools and services such as social media. Today, crowdsourcing and social media allow information to be shared in real time, allowing first responders to reach victims much faster than before.

In the years since Hurricane Katrina, many wonder how the robust and well-developed social media websites we enjoy today could have been leveraged. Could we have saved more lives had there been a full-fledged Facebook or Twitter?

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake that rocked Haiti in January of 2010 served as an example of the opportunities social media and mobile technology present to support the great work of our disaster response professionals.

Within a few hours of the quake, a man trapped with 20 other people under a collapsed building in Port-au-Prince managed to send a photo of the wreckage from his phone to a cousin in Chicago. The cousin tweeted the photo to “@RedCross” and the Red Cross in turn relayed the location to first responders in Haiti. In previous disasters, these victims may not have been

¹ Stephen Morris and John Horrigan, *13 million Americans made donations online after Hurricane Katrina and Rita*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2005/13-million-Americans-made-donations-online-after-Hurricanes-Katrina-and-Rita/Data-Memo.aspx> (Nov. 24, 2005).

² *Id.*

³ Thomas Frank, *Katrina inspires record charity*, USA TODAY http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2005-11-13-katrina-charity_x.htm?csp=34 (Nov. 13, 2005).

⁴ Stephen Morris and John Horrigan, *13 million Americans made donations online after Hurricane Katrina and Rita*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2005/13-million-Americans-made-donations-online-after-Hurricanes-Katrina-and-Rita/Data-Memo.aspx> (Nov. 24, 2005).

rescued in time. In other instances, using geo-location technology built into phones, allowed rescue workers to pinpoint the location of trapped victims and save many lives.

To cite one prominent example of innovation in disaster response from our membership, immediately after the 2010 Haiti earthquake, Google worked with the United States Department of State to create Google Person Finder, an online registry and message board for survivors, family, and loved ones affected by a natural disaster allowing them to post and search for information about each other's status and whereabouts. Google Person Finder launched in English, French and Haitian Creole on January 15, less than three days after the earthquake.

Social media a vital role in the critical days and weeks after a disaster, when efforts transition from response to recovery. In a connected, borderless medium, the excuse that donating relief money is too complicated and confusing has largely been eradicated through text messaging and social media. In the first 48 hours following the Haitian Earthquake, the Red Cross raised more than \$3 million dollars from people texting a \$10 donation. "Crowd funding" empowers citizens to donate to, and solicit donations for, victims of disasters through posts to Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn, Twitter and other social media sites.

To highlight just a few examples from The Internet Association membership:

- Facebook launched the Disaster Relief on Facebook Page, where millions of people could educate themselves and find out how to help.
- Zynga, the online gaming company, was able to raise nearly \$3 million for relief efforts from their game players.
- Amazon.com customers gave more than \$750,000 through the Amazon.com website. Through a corporate campaign, Expedia, Inc. donated \$200,000 to the United Nations and held a special 2:1 match, with employees donating an additional \$75,000 (total donation of \$270,000 to the U.N.).

Applying the lessons learned from the Haiti disaster, a protocol has begun to emerge. Facebook's Disaster Relief Page is now used for wherever disaster and misfortune may strike. The American Red Cross's Facebook page alone now has more than half a million fans to which the organization delivers disaster news and allows people to donate both blood and money.

Beyond the dissemination of disaster information and donations, the Red Cross has established a Social Media Command Center – the first social media-based operation devoted to humanitarian relief. Located in the Red Cross National Disaster Operations Center in Washington, D.C., the center is expanding the Red Cross's ability to engage with the public during emergencies and enabling Red Cross team members to determine where to position workers on the ground. The command center allows the Red Cross to better serve those who need help, spot trends, and better anticipate the public's needs; and connect people with the resources they need, like food, water, shelter or even emotional support.

Additionally, the Red Cross has established a Social Media Volunteer Corps program to help respond to questions from and provide information to the public during disasters. The Red Cross has conducted numerous webinars to train this new digital volunteer army, who have played critical roles in working to verify and curate the incredible volume of data during disasters,

notifying Digital Operations Center staff of online trends and situational information that can inform disaster-response efforts.

Google's work on the Haiti earthquake led to the formation of the Google Crisis Response team, which has launched Google Person Finder again for several subsequent disasters, in many different languages and with a variety of data exchange partners.

Before I conclude, I'd like to quickly touch on a few more recent disasters and highlights some social media success stories from among our membership.

Japan Tsunami, March 2011: Images of entire cities being crushed under water half a world away left many Americans feeling helpless. Luckily we have companies like Amazon.com, which offered homepage placement to the American Red Cross and Mercy Corps in addition to donating their payment technology. This led to more than \$1.8 million in relief aid for our friends in Japan. Social media played an important role as the most efficient and reliable way to connect with relatives. Even the U.S. State Department took to Twitter to publish emergency number and inform Japanese residents in America of how to contact their families affected in Japan.⁵

Tuscaloosa, AL and Joplin, MO Tornados, April & May 2011: When a tornado devastated Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a local school system went online to post a request for volunteers to help clean up their school—amazingly, 80 people showed up in less than 30 minutes. This typifies the unmatched power of social media; you would be hard pressed to make 40 phone calls in 30 minutes, never mind 80. As users leverage our member companies' services, our member companies also lend their manpower and expertise in the recovery process. Expedia, Inc. employees continue to volunteer to provide their ongoing support in the clean-up and recovery effort.

Hurricane Sandy, October 2012: When last fall's once-in-a-century type storm slammed our eastern seaboard, people took to the Internet to document their experience. The volume was so large that the Red Cross asked 23 staffers to monitor over 2.5 million social media posts; of which, 4,500 were tagged for first responders to follow up on.

New York City itself turned to Twitter to seek out emergency-related tweets in the aftermath of the storm. For instance, the city's Chief Digital Officer organized responses to hundreds of Twitter questions pouring in for those in need of accurate information.⁶ In addition to disseminating information, the Fire Department of New York's Social Media Manager used Twitter to serve as a liaison between those residents in distress and firefighters and EMS members. As phone lines remained down, the Social Media Manager responded to tweets

⁵ Harry Wallop, *Japan earthquake: how Twitter and Facebook helped*, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/8379101/Japan-earthquake-how-Twitter-and-Facebook-helped.html> (Mar. 13, 2011).

⁶ Chris Moody, *Meet FDNY's one-woman Twitter response team guiding New Yorkers through storm*, <http://news.yahoo.com/blogs/ticket/meet-fdny-one-woman-twitter-response-team-guiding-141143449.html> (Oct. 30, 2012).

requesting assistance by collecting phone numbers and the details of the emergency then relayed that information to first responders.

Airbnb, an online marketplace for users to find housing accommodations, sprang into action following Hurricane Sandy. With more than 100,000 people still homeless a week after Hurricane Sandy hit the Northeast, Airbnb partnered with the City of New York to connect those without shelter to people who had extra space. Nearly 1,500 Airbnb members opened up their homes for free to people in need. *Please See Exhibit B.*

Justin Ausiello's Jersey Shore Hurricane News Facebook page became a trusted place for information and served as a crucial tool for those affected by the hurricane, by informing citizens about shelters, supplies, and news.⁷ In a truly miraculous story, a woman noticed a post on Mr. Ausiello's page of the badly hit South Seaside Park, where her 93 year old, diabetic grandmother was trapped. After the woman sent a message to the News Page, her grandmother was subsequently rescued.

ebay Inc., an online market place for consumers, coordinated a company-wide effort to support the massive community relief and recovery effort and looked to more than 210,000 users for assistance. As a result, StubHub, ebay, and PayPal facilitated over \$10 million of support for Hurricane Sandy relief.

Moore, Oklahoma Tornado, May 2013: Thanks to advanced technology and excellent meteorologists, Oklahomans knew of the tornado risks days in advance. Social media supplemented traditional means of spreading the message to take shelter. In the immediate aftermath, FEMA encouraged survivors to update their social networks to let their loved ones know their whereabouts, if they were safe or needed emergency assistance. Along with the Red Cross, cities, animal assistance groups, and prayer/religious support groups now have a strong presence on social media.

Social media has changed the way American citizens respond to tragedy. The city of Moore uses its Facebook page to inform citizens on ways they can help. (*Please see Exhibit C*). Social media platforms like Flickr and Instagram allowed people from all over the country to see the both the wreckage and the hope in Moore, Oklahoma on their computer screens, tablets and smartphones. Seeing unfiltered images in real time tells the story in ways the traditional news media is unable to, and allows people to feel connected giving them an even greater desire to help.

Continuing similar efforts as it did with Hurricane Sandy, ebay is promoting and facilitating customer donations. In addition to providing an opportunity on its homepage for customers to make contributions, sellers and buyers have other options available to them. For instance, sellers may donate a percentage of their sale proceeds to a featured relief organization or buyers may purchase items via the website that benefit relief organizations, marked with a special charity icon. Additionally, PayPal powers payment processing for partner organizations and personal fundraisers.

⁷ Jersey Shore Hurricane News, <https://www.facebook.com/JerseyShoreHurricaneNews?sid=0.9051242845943719>, last visited June 3, 2013.

Conclusion

The Internet has served as a remarkable tool to save lives, facilitate unprecedented philanthropic relief efforts, and improve disaster responsiveness.

And yet, there are still challenges that remain. Emergency response professionals are not yet fully ready to collect, respond or react to the incoming stream of social data in a timely manner. Responding to this challenge will require a collaborative effort among government agencies, first responders, technology companies, public safety officials and the general public.

It is my pledge to you that The Internet Association will do its part to facilitate these conversations and collaborations so that we can harness the power of social media and strengthen our nation's emergency preparedness, response and recovery for the 21st Century.

Exhibit A⁸



Posted by bri_lynn_love

⁸ First Image: Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin's Twitter Post Updates. *Also available* at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/05/21/oklahoma-tornados-2013-killed_n_3310410.html (last visited May 31, 2013). Second Image: Instagram Photo of Oklahoma Toranado Afermath by lynn_love.

Exhibit B – The City of Moore Facebook Page⁹

Recent Posts By Others



Shaun Rowell



A family is reporting they are stuck in their storm shelter which is in their garage. They are unable to get the door open. 1104 NE 6th.

Like · [Comment](#) · 3 minutes ago



Prayers For Oklahoma City, OK

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Prayers-for-Moore-OK/159808000773876>

Please share prayers and information on page.



Prayers For Oklahoma City, OK

To help others find comfort in horrible times.
Page: 46 like this

Like · [Comment](#) · [Share](#) · 7 minutes ago



Jesse Alarcon

i live in plaza towers, if anyone sees 3 boston terriers, please call me they have tags with my house number i believe but my house is gone. please call me 343-0981 or my wife 213-7641, they are names gus, libby and sammy

Like · [Comment](#) · 7 minutes ago



Jessica-Josh Lively I pray they are safe

3 minutes ago · [Like](#)



Write a comment...

⁹ The City of Moore, <https://www.facebook.com/cityofmoore> (last visited June 3, 2013).

Exhibit C – AirBnb Page for Hurricane Sandy



Thank you to the 1440 Airbnb members who have already opened up their homes for free.