

# Use of Social Media and Mobile Devices for Station Continuity and News Coverage

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# Chapter 1. Introduction

This appendix to the SAFER Manual on how to use mobile devices and social applications in a disaster will look both at how they may be used by your staff to help the station continue to operate and how the same devices and applications can also be used to involve your listeners to “crowd-source” [1] information as part of your news coverage.

We begin with a short review of current disaster response theory because that is directly relevant to both continuity of services and how stations will gather and report the news in disasters.

## 1.1. Emergent behavior in disasters

The two leading disaster research centers, the Universities of Colorado and Delaware, have found that while some individuals may panic in disasters, the public in general does not. [2] Instead, a specific kind of collaborative behavior takes place that leads to effective response.

It is called “emergent behavior,” [3] originally observed in the social insects - ants, bees, and termites. When a large number of ants -- or humans -- act at the same time, the individuals' simple, uncoordinated actions can collectively result in complex interactions and effective response.

Researchers have shown this has been the case in many major disasters:

“Studies of evacuation at times of crises have now been undertaken for the last 50 years. They have consistently shown that at times of great crises, much of the organized behavior is emergent rather than traditional. In addition, it is of a very decentralized nature, with the dominance of pluralistic decision making, and the appearance of imaginative and innovative new attempts to cope with the contingencies that typically appear in major disasters.”[4]

Similarly, Dr. Erik Auf der Heide wrote:

“... Disasters are different from routine, daily emergencies. The difference is more than just one of magnitude. Disasters generally cannot be adequately managed merely by mobilizing more personnel and material. Disasters may cross jurisdictional boundaries, create the need to undertake unfamiliar tasks, change the structure of responding organizations, result in the creation of new organization, trigger the mobilization of participants that do not ordinarily respond to local emergency incidents, and disable the routine equipment and facilities for emergency response. As a consequence of these changes, the normal procedures for coordinating community emergency response may not be adapted well to the situation.”[5]

So, emergent behavior is critical to effective disaster response, and will happen no matter what. However, what is different today is that the combination of mobile devices and social media applications not only allows emergent behavior, but actually *fosters* it! [6]

Social media users tend to develop “virtual friendships” with others who share similar interests and values, perhaps because the social media tools encourage sharing of real-time information throughout the day in a way that breaks down distinctions between work and personal life and gives a better indication of shared interests and values that in turn leads to deeper bonds.

Also, social media's ability to share *real-time, location-based information* via mobile devices makes them invaluable in disasters. They can provide precisely the hyper-local [7] information that both the public and first responders need. [8] For example the identities of the victims in the Virginia Tech shootings were first – and, more important, accurately -- identified via Facebook and text messages, considerably before they were announced by authorities. [9]

Some government agencies and media outlets may decry the loss of top-down command and control resulting from the use of social media. However, the controversy has effectively been settled by the technology: people will use social media in a disaster whether or not officials want them to. If that were the case, wouldn't it be better to find ways in which the social media and general public might actually contribute to understanding and managing the crisis?

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[1] "Crowdsourcing" is the concept of taking a function, in this case, news gathering, that is normally performed by trained professionals and instead (or in addition) involving the general public in the function.

[2] Kendra, T. Wachtendorf and E. L. Quarantelli. Who was in charge of the massive evacuation of Lower Manhattan by water transport on 9/11? No one was, yet it was an extremely successful operation. Implications? September, 2002.

[3] Emergence. Wikipedia

[4] Wachtendorf and Quarantelli, op. cit.

[5] Erik auf der Heide. Disaster response: principles of preparation and coordination. Ch. 4.

[6] Stephenson, W. David and Eric Bonabeau. Expecting the Unexpected: The Need for a Networked Terrorism and Disaster Response Strategy. Homeland Security Affairs III, no. 1 (February 2007)

[7] Iskold, Alex. The Rise Of Hyperlocal Information. ReadWriteWeb, Nov. 21, 2007.

[8] Leysia Palen, Kenneth M. Anderson, Gloria Mark, James Martin, Douglas Sicker, Martha Palmer, Dirk Grunwald. A Vision for Technology-Mediated Support for Public Participation & Assistance in Mass Emergencies & Disasters. Proceedings of the 2010 ACM-BCS Visions of Computer Science Conference.

[9] Leysia Palen, Sarah Vieweg, Sophia B. Liu, Amanda Lee Hughes. Crisis in a Networked World Features of Computer-Mediated Communication in the April 16, 2007, Virginia Tech Event. Social Science Computer Review.

## Chapter 2. Social Media and Station Operations in a Disaster

One of the realities of disasters is that even though readiness manuals and disaster simulations are helpful, every actual disaster has idiosyncratic elements that could not have been predicted and therefore must be dealt with on a real-time basis and using those resources that are still immediately available, and practical.

In addition, we have learned from past disasters that ordinary chain of command structures may be impossible to maintain: as happened on 9/11, key managers may be victims themselves or unable to physically reach the facilities due to the circumstances.

### 2.1. Experiment now

Being able to share real-time, location-based information during a disaster is critical. It's even more important to know how to communicate effectively even when there is limited bandwidth. That is part of the reason why social applications such as Twitter have become so popular in disasters: they use almost no bandwidth, so Tweets can get through when other messages cannot.

However, your station staff can't wait until a disaster happens to begin using these tools: the learning curve is simply too steep to have to learn a new app AND handle the crisis.

Therefore, we suggest that you begin using these tools *now*: both so that your staff will be familiar with them in advance (so that staffers will automatically turn to them in a disaster), and so that your audience will be accustomed to engaging with your station in the social media space.

This emphasis on web-based communication is a significant shift from past practice: in many disasters, traditional phone use is the *worst* communication tool both because of the bandwidth it requires and because it is primarily used for one-to-one conversations. However, many staff members may still instinctively turn to the phone unless they are comfortable with the alternatives.

There's another attractive reason for exploring social media tools now. More and more organizations find that social media tools are as valuable to share information on a daily basis as they are in a disaster (for example, using a wiki can result in dramatic reductions in email volume; [\[10\]](#) and Yammer, a Twitter-inspired tool for secure instant communication within corporations, allows instant updates on staffers' location and activities).

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[\[10\]](#) Hof, Robert. [Something Wiki This Way Comes](#). Bloomberg Business Week, June 7, 2004.

## **Chapter 3. Principles of Social Media Use in a Disaster**

### **3.1. Instead of top-down direction, solutions emerge**

Using social media in a disaster requires a new management style. Senior management can't dictate the solution: it must emerge from the ground-up contributions of many people, each contributing the small pieces of relevant information they know.

The whole is also greater than the sum of its parts. Sharing information and insights will stimulate opinions and information offered by others. It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle.

### **3.2. Organizational charts must be flexible in a disaster**

Similarly, you can't get hung up on normal reporting relationships or authority in a disaster: managers may be victims themselves or otherwise unable to communicate. Plan for alternative pathways in your organizational charts, and empower staff to delegate and communicate when required.

### **3.3. Everyone can contribute**

Some staffer who is normally not involved in station operations may have a critical piece of situational awareness simply because of where they happened to be when the disaster struck or because they may still be able to communicate when others aren't. They may also know some key resource and/or person who could be crucial. More important, dealing with fast-changing circumstances may well require a synthesis of observations and ideas by anyone available.

### **3.4. Strategy, tactics and tools must change on the fly**

One of the reasons why real-time, location-based information is critical is that disasters can alter so radically and so quickly. A prudent course at one moment is folly a few minutes later. It is hard to simulate that kind of situation in desktop exercises, but social media, by providing real-time, location-based information, can at least reduce the uncertainty somewhat by providing the latest "situational awareness." Then they allow instant sharing so that strategy and tactics can be quickly altered.

## Chapter 4. Devices and social media apps for disasters

It is important not to think of any one social media tool or device as essential, because your ability to use any one of them in a given disaster may depend on fast-changing variables such as bandwidth availability, electricity supplies, and damage to cell towers and other infrastructure. Rather, think of them as a range of options from which you can mix and match.

### 4.1. Devices

#### 4.1.1. Cellphones

Even the most basic phones now usually include cameras, which staffers on the scene can use to document damage to facilities, fallen trees or other obstructions, hazards such as fires, wind, etc. Remember that in any kind of disaster it is better whenever possible to use text messages (which use almost no bandwidth) than regular voice calls, in order to reduce bandwidth congestion. So encourage staffers to experiment with texting now.

#### 4.1.2. Smartphones

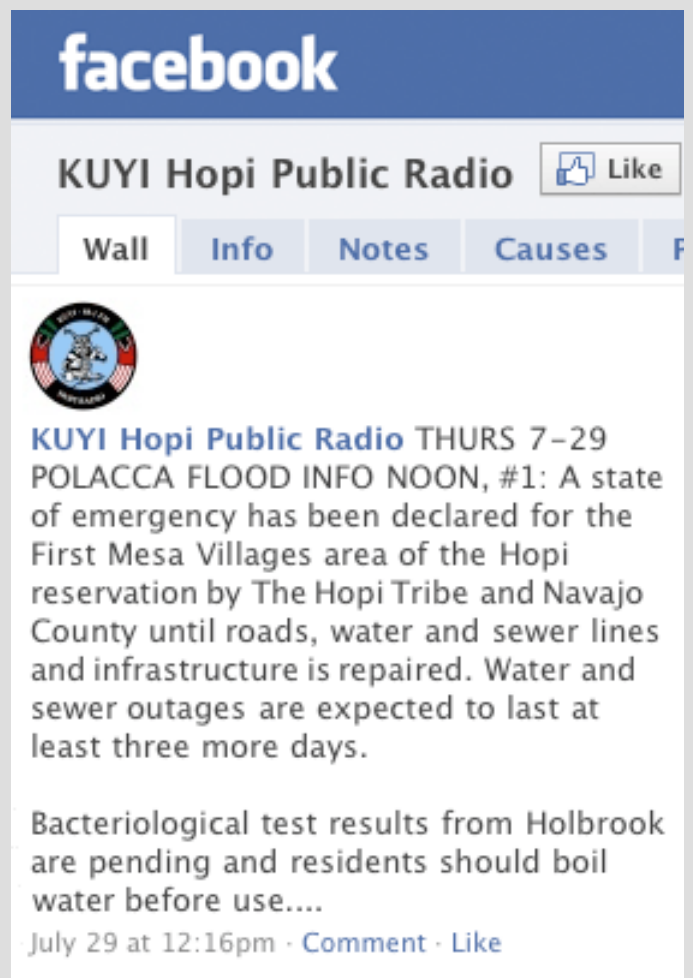
These phones, which are becoming more and more the norm, add computing power, functions such as video, and GPS chips, which can be critical because of establishing precisely where the user is. One of their advantages is that they can store disaster information that users can still access even if the local communications infrastructure is totally destroyed.

It's a good idea to make your disaster plan available in a phone-friendly format that staffers can download in advance (making certain they always update as the plan evolves!) so that they will literally have it in hand when disaster strikes. (Of course, keeping an updated, printed copy in various locations is also advised.)

### Social media may provide vital link for people far from your coverage area

[KUYI Hopi Radio](#) Station Manager Richard Alun Davis readily admits he used to be skeptical about exactly how valuable social media such as Facebook could be in a disaster.

That, however, was before wildfires and then floods hit the remote reservation community during the summer of 2010. That's when [the station's Facebook page](#) became a critical source of information, especially for the "Hopi diaspora" -- those who have moved far away from the reservation but who still are tightly linked to it.



*From Facebook*

Davis says that even though the reservation is only 94 miles east of Flagstaff, in many cases  
*(continued on next page)*

### 4.1.3. Walkie-talkies

In an absolute worst case, if power and Internet connections are lost, you can still have some rudimentary information-sharing if your staffers all have cheap walkie-talkies.

One model for such a system, the District of Columbia Emergency Radio Network (DCERN) [11], was pioneered by D.C. literary agent Bill Adler. The members all go outside one Sunday night a month, turn on their walkie-talkies, tune to the same channel, and practice relaying messages. They have been able to blanket the District of Columbia, and can pass the information worldwide if needed through a link to ham radio operators.

## 4.2. Applications

### 4.2.1. Twitter/Yammer

Twitter has become a widely-used disaster information-sharing tool because of its ability to concisely convey location-based, real-time information. However, its usability was initially limited by the lack of uniform standards to describe and identify the types of information being relayed, making it very hard to aggregate and share information, particularly by automatic computer-based distribution.

During the Haiti earthquake, the Universities of Colorado and California's Empower the Public With Information in a Crisis (EPIC) program rushed into use the "[Tweak the Tweet](#)" (TtT) taxonomy they had been developing. TtT introduced uniform "hashtags" such as #loc (location) #need (type of aid needed) into emergency Tweets. The addition of this standard syntax for information makes it machine-readable, which also means that the data can be automatically disseminated, a critical factor in disasters. TtT's significance extends beyond Twitter use in disasters, creating a model for systematizing the content of other social media alerts. Because of the system's simplicity and logic, it is likely the public will rapidly

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"we might as well be a world away," since the mainstream media often ignore events on the reservation. KUYI became even more important when the tribal council voted in 2009 to close down the tribal newspaper.

During the fires, KUYI Hopi Radio put up county and wilderness area fire alerts on Facebook as soon as they became available. They also posted pictures of the burned areas, which were then identified by former residents.

The station and its Facebook page became even more important during the floods that began in late July, because the event went unreported elsewhere, even though damage on the reservation was much more extensive than in Flagstaff. The Facebook page became the main source of information for family members outside the reservation about what was happening there.



*From Facebook*

Equally important, Davis says that sometimes the reservation doesn't receive needed assistance during disasters "because there's an assumption that the Bureau of Indian Affairs will take care of it," which is not always the case. During the floods, a non-Native American couple from Colorado who had begun following the Facebook page several months before saw what was happening, and arrived several days later with 800 pounds of much-appreciated donated food supplies to supplement efforts of the entire Hopi community on and off the reservation pulling together to help one another.

In retrospect, Davis now says "If I'd do anything over again, it would be to bury my stereotypes of social media and approach it with an open mind."

adopt TtT use in a disaster (to our knowledge, no one to date has launched a formal education campaign about use of Twitter hashtags of any sort, but new ones spread quickly and are used continually to classify and search Twitter contact, simply because users quickly grasp their utility and the logic of how to create short, accurate ones). However, it is also logical that a formal outreach program by public radio stations might speed their dissemination and adoption. Using TtT to ask listeners to contribute information about a given geographic location in a disaster would likely result in quick adoption of the tags by users.

You may want to consider two types of strategy regarding Twitter use.

Many organizations have adopted [Yammer](#), a no-cost/low-cost variation on Twitter developed specifically for use behind firewalls for secure communication. <sup>[12]</sup> Preferably, you would use Yammer internally, and, as many public stations already have done, also create a Twitter account for communication with listeners both in normal times and disasters.

Note that for your Twitter feed to have credibility with listeners, it must observe the spirit of social media and both “follow” other users (especially listeners) as well as interact with them on a regular basis, creating a dialogue rather than simply using the Twitter feed as alternative way of broadcasting your program schedule.

#### **4.2.2. Facebook**

Facebook is a critical social media tool in disasters, in part because its user base dwarfs those for other social apps and in part because its API allows so many types of content (Twitter feeds, YouTube Videos, etc.), to come together on a Facebook page. The fact that Facebook comments are not limited to 140 characters also allows for more detailed information sharing.

Facebook’s “Discussion” feature allows listeners to discuss a situation or event and offer their own observations. When Facebook added the “Places” feature to its mobile edition, it became possible for those posting Status Updates to give their location, which could be critical in a disaster for “hyperlocal information.”

As community station KUYI Hopi Radio (see sidebar) found, one of Facebook’s most important uses in a disaster can be its ability to alert family and friends outside of your listening area to what the current situation is. That kind of global outreach, by the way, is one of the greatest substantive contributions a station can provide to the overall response effort: the better job it does using social media and other tools that are hosted outside the local area (and therefore less affected by bandwidth or power limits) to keep people elsewhere informed, the less need they will feel to make phone calls to affected friends and family. That preserves as much bandwidth as possible for first responders.

#### **4.2.3. Wikis**

Perhaps worse than having no disaster plan is having an obsolete one. Using a wiki as the platform for your station’s disaster plan will increase the likelihood that it remains current, because any and all users can contribute content based on findings from response to new disasters as they occur.

During an actual disaster, if you have adequate bandwidth and enough staffers have computer access, the wiki can also be used as the means for staffers to share information and quickly and easily access all information from past plans and disasters. <sup>[13]</sup>



[CrisisWiki](#) has become a central global repository for disaster response which you can use both as a source of information and as a model for your own wiki.

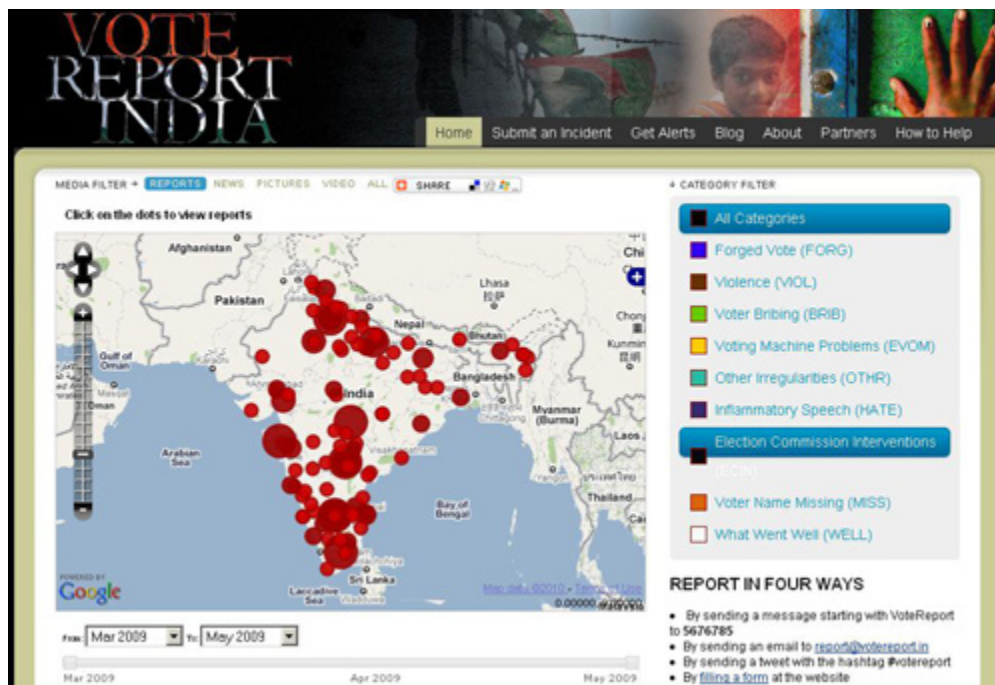
A wiki is another example of a social media tool that the station could use as a critical component of its day-to-day management and then switch seamlessly to disaster use. Its advantages include radically reducing email and increased collaboration. [14]

#### 4.2.4. Crowdmap

[Crowdmap](#) is another example of a disaster tool that you can use as part of your regular news-gathering and to test the waters in terms of crowdsourcing information, specifically because it also was created as a tool for visualizing election data. It is a free application created by the Africa-based Ushahidi Project, specifically as a way to organize crowd-sourced information into interactive maps and timelines.

Crowdmap has been used frequently in disaster management, most notably during the Haiti earthquake. It is particularly helpful for the two aspects of disaster coverage most applicable to involving the public in information-gathering: managing crowd-sourced input and visualizing hyperlocal information. Best of all, it is hosted by Ushahidi, so that it can still function and be accessible even if your local bandwidth is limited or infrastructure crippled.

If, for example, you use Crowdmap as a way of organizing listeners' information around election coverage, you can both enrich your coverage and gain valuable experience in using the tool that could be applied during a disaster.



*Crowdmap*

#### 4.2.5. Photos and Video

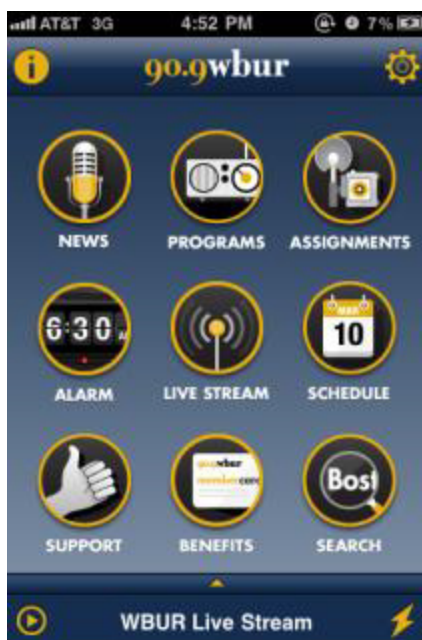
Since they were first used widely during the London subway bombing, photos (and now video) from cell phones can provide invaluable situational awareness, although their use will be severely limited when there are bandwidth constraints. Photos can be gathered on services such as [Twitpic](#) if a tag associating them with a disaster are added ( [as with these from the 2010 Boulder wildfires](#), [#boulderfire](#) ). Videos could be even more helpful because of the ability to capture motion and

pan, but you need to discuss in advance of a disaster what kind of visual information would be helpful. Such a discussion would be an excellent topic for a “Meet-Up” (see section 6.1) to lay the groundwork for an involving the public in your coverage.

#### 4.2.6. Comprehensive app

Finally, if your resources allow, consider building a smartphone app similar to the ones created by many public radio stations, including WBUR in Boston: it combines buttons for a wide range of functions which have made it a must for listeners (live stream, news, program listings and podcast, making a contribution, and... “assignments”). Clicking “assignments” lets listeners learn about crowdsourced content the station would like them to contribute. This kind of all-purpose app takes the guesswork out of connecting with the station – especially important in high-stress situations such as disasters – and increases the bond between listener and station.

If you’re interested in a similar app, it was created by the [Public Radio Exchange \(PRX\)](#) which is making it available to other stations either by building one for your station, or by inviting use of the open source code to build a similar app in-house or hire your own developer to work with the code.



WBUR iPhone App

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[11] [District of Columbia Emergency Radio Network \(DCERN\)](#)

[12] [Yammer.com](#) A limited version can be used for free. The more robust version is available to non-profits at a rate of \$2 or 3 a month per user depending on the features included.

[13] [The wiki will also be more valuable if a tag system such as TtT is used for the real-time data.](#)

[14] Jeanne C. Meister. [Wikis at Work: Benefits and Practices](#), Chief Learning Officer, February, 2008.

## Chapter 5. Creating a new synthesis: emergent journalism

The combination of mobile devices and social media also have the potential to transform coverage of a disaster into a new hybrid that combines the best of professional journalism and web-enabled “citizen journalism.” [15]

Because the emergent behavior discussed earlier is commonplace in disasters, this hybrid form will be referred to in the remainder of this document as “emergent journalism.” [16]

It is the social aspect of the new media that would facilitate this change: as organizations that have begun using wikis internally have found, when there is a platform that allows people who have a wide range of background, experience and perspective to contribute and share information, what results is a whole that is more than the sum of its parts: a combination of interchange, debate, and removal of arbitrary distinctions about the value of anyone’s contributions based on their position leads to a synthesis and new insights that no individual, no matter how bright or experienced, could have come up with.

Perhaps the most vivid example of this phenomenon is [Intellipedia](#), the secure wiki established in the wake of 9/11 to allow “flatter” sharing of data within the intelligence community. It uses the same open-source software used by Wikipedia, allowing intelligence analysts to share information through the federal government’s classified Intelink intranet site. While most Intellipedia use is never seen by the public, one example of the platform’s ability to quickly share and evaluate information was when New York Yankees pitcher Corby Liddle’s plane crashed into an apartment building. Analysts from a variety of agencies issued 80 information updates within two hours, including a finding that it was not a terrorist attack. [17]

### Brian Lehrer Show “Uncommon Economic Indicators” Project

In 2007, WNYC’s Brian Lehrer Show launched an ambitious crowdsourcing/citizen journalism initiative as part of its [Uncommon Economic Indicators](#) project. It was done to add depth to the show’s reporting on how the recession affected the New York metropolitan area.

As part of this project, WNYC created [an online manual to crowdsourcing](#) that is a substantial how-to guide for starting a similar project at your own station. A valuable aspect of the manual is a [set of 10 tips](#) based on the show’s experiences with crowdsourcing over more than 3 years.

Why did the station commit to crowdsourcing? According to project director Annie Schreffler, Brian Lehrer had long been an advocate of listener involvement in news. As the manual says, “We value new ways to collaborate with our listeners and we constantly look for innovative methods to do that.”

The WNYC project stands out in part because the station didn’t just passively open its website and accept any content submitted: it modeled the kind of substantive information it hoped to receive and also gave would-be citizen journalists guidance. For example, it shared the [Principles of Journalism](#) with readers, and Schreffler did the first story, to give a frame of reference. They also didn’t hesitate to remove inappropriate material (although Schreffler says the listener community frequently “self-corrected” errors).

Schreffler is passionate about crowdsourcing as a tool for adding a valuable extra dimension to the Brian Lehrer Show’s coverage, to complement its professional reporting. “The Dow falling during the early part of the recession didn’t translate to most listeners, while the listener submissions did,” she says. “Suddenly, everyone had a place to go where they could share something.” She says part of the challenge of a citizen journalism project is, frankly, “convincing professional journalists to hand over the microphone.”

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Most examinations of “citizen journalism” to date have examined it as a phenomenon that is distinct from the work done by professional journalists, but what if public radio stations could actually integrate this crowdsourced information with its own resources, and if there was actual dialogue with the contributors? That could result in a new kind of coverage similar to the emergent behavior that the researchers have documented in disaster response: “emergent journalism.”

This would seem particularly relevant in a disaster, when a station’s news staff, no matter what the size, would be quickly overwhelmed by the volume of information, and, in many cases, the need to monitor a wide geographic area.

Don’t forget that, even if they have never met in the physical world, many of your listeners may already know each other through social networks that may range from Twitter to the comment streams on your station’s website.

When a disaster happens, the social media don’t just allow emergent behavior to happen, they actually foster it, because these virtual communities instantly spring into action, and are able to act collaboratively even more rapidly than we’ve seen strangers do in past disasters. Reliable leaders who consistently provide valuable information (researchers term them “High Yield Twitterers” [18] ) may have already been identified and are looked to by others while some may be quite happy to simply repeat information to their own networks, etc. Each plays a role. And, as disaster researcher Leysia Palen points out, members of these virtual social networks who may be thousands of miles from the disaster often contribute valuable information as well. [19]

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The show staff made it easy for listeners to participate. Even though the project photos were hosted on a Flickr site, listeners didn’t have to register with Flickr: they could submit videos directly through a box on the project home page. Schreffler also emphasizes that budgetary limits forced them to be resourceful, especially taking advantage of free web-based tools such as Google Maps or their YouTube group page.

## Uncommon Indicators VIDEO CONTEST

Wednesday, June 03, 2009 - 02:45 PM

You’ve heard us talk about it on air. Now it’s time for YOU to submit an Uncommon Economic Indicator video to our contest.



Why a contest? We’ve enjoyed reading and hearing [your observations on the recession](#). Now we want to see them. By screening the finalists to our live WNYC audience and to the larger audience with Rooftop Films, together we are telling the story about how the economy is affecting all of us.

The incentive may attract budding film makers, but we’re not looking for high gloss. What’s important is that your video is a personal observation on an event, behavior or change caused by the economic crises. Use the recording equipment you have, think about how to tell us what you know, [and send in the video](#).

*From Youtube*

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Analyses of crowdsourced information using social media in past disasters has shown that much of the information gathered and shared through these social networks is the classic who, what, when, why and how that trained journalists contribute. [20]

However, what won't happen in a vacuum will be these citizen journalists automatically observing principles of traditional journalism, such as attributing sources or recording significant details that would enrich the coverage.

## 5.1. The challenge in setting up an emergent journalism process

The challenge is for public radio stations to reach out to their members/listeners who might be interested in providing such information in a disaster, and jointly to develop guidelines and procedures for collecting and submitting this information. In addition, they can jointly explore ways that dialogue through the social media can help both parties work together, under extremely difficult circumstances, to create reliable and informative coverage that would combine the best elements of traditional and crowdsourced [21] journalism. Having done that, the framework will be in place for "emergent journalism" to occur during a disaster.

The remainder of this document will outline suggested principles and best practices for an emergent journalism initiative (should you choose to launch one at your station); evaluate how various mobile devices and social media applications could be used to gather and distribute valuable information in a disaster; and consider some of the issues that need to be addressed collaboratively for an effective program to result.

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[15] The emergent journalism concept is strongly influenced by the work of Associate Prof. Leysia Palen and her associates at [the University of Colorado's EPIC Project](#).

[16] The distinction between a citizen journalism program and "emergent journalism" as visualized here is that the latter would try to actually synthesize the contributions of citizen and professional journalists instead of offering them as parallel sources of information.

[17] [ODNI Intellipedia](#). The Collaboration Project.

[18] Sarah Vieweg, Amanda L. Hughes, Kate Starbird, & Leysia Palen. [Oklahoma Grassfires & Red River Floods](#). connectivIT Lab, Technology, Media & Society Program (ATLAS) Computer Science Department University of Colorado, Boulder CO. Proceedings of the 28th international conference on Human factors in computing systems, 2010.

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Common courtesy also plays a critical role: Schreffler emphasizes that it's absolutely critical to publicly acknowledge listeners' contributions and effort, whether through a mention on the web site or events such as the one where [the best listener-generated videos on "Uncommon Indicators"](#) were screened and honored.

Schreffler advises that you make certain that if you launch a crowdsourcing initiative during regular programming, you maintain a database of contributors (especially those with special skills) so that you can reach out directly to them in a disaster. She points out that on her own time she has learned how to create an Ushahidi site, so that in a disaster she'd be able to come forward and contribute her services.

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[19] Leysia Palen. [\*Online Social Media in Crisis Events\*](#). EDUCAUSE Quarterly, vol. 31, no. 3 (July–September 2008)

[20] Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird & Palen, op. cit.

[21] Crowdsourcing refers to the practice of inviting the public to perform a task (such as news gathering) normally done by employees and/or trained specialists.

## Chapter 6. Emergent Journalism Process

The following are meant simply as exploratory guidelines. Hopefully it is obvious by now that it is impossible to definitively plan and execute an emergent journalism process. By definition it must instead evolve based on the local resources, local players, and situations as they manifest themselves. These steps, however, may increase the chances of success.

### 6.1. Take the initiative: hold a Meetup

Public station KPBS-FM/TV cobbled together a citizen journalism initiative (see sidebar) on the fly, in the middle of the San Diego wildfires in 2007. However, it stands to reason that the more advance planning you can do, the greater the likelihood that the program will be a success, especially since the social media depend so heavily on establishing mutual trust. It's hard to do that in the middle of a crisis!

While you could initiate an online discussion with listeners through your website, perhaps the most effective way to create the framework for an emergent journalism program is to hold a "Meetup," where listeners are invited to come to the station for several hours some evening or weekend and meet with representatives of station management and news staff.

Based on the public broadcasting "[PubCamp](#)" experience the event is more likely to be successful if you establish a specific goal in advance: determining whether there is sufficient interest to merit creating an emergent journalism initiative, and, if so, what the guidelines might be.

For the program to be a success, there needs to be a true exchange of ideas in which listeners/citizen journalists' opinions on how they can contribute are really solicited and respected. This is especially true since social media may allow them

#### **KPBS: pioneering use of social media in a crisis**

When wildfires hit San Diego in 2007, social media were far less ubiquitous and multi-faceted than they are today. That makes [KPBS'](#) pioneering efforts to integrate social media into the rest of its reporting on the disaster even more impressive.

Convergence Editor Leng Caloh, who is responsible for integrating the station's radio, TV and online platforms, managed the effort. She had little precedent to guide her.

The volume of communications of all sorts quickly overwhelmed the region's telecom infrastructure. Caloh decided early in the coverage to swap the normally feature-rich website for a plain HTML one, which would load more quickly and require less bandwidth. The station actually went off the air temporarily, when power lines to its transmitter were burned (a commercial station carried the signal for a day until power was restored).

Even though KPBS hadn't formally begun to use social media at the time, Caloh and other staff members had played with Twitter, Google's My Map and other apps on their own time, so they were able quickly to apply that experience to the station's (and audience's) needs.

There was a lot of trial and error. The station had not created an official Twitter account in advance. Caloh says KPBS' tweets during the wildfires were largely more of a "broadcast" model used primarily to broadcast updates, rather than a real dialogue with listeners. She says that over time, the staffers posting tweets learned to be more succinct, to provide more information within Twitter's 140-character limit.

What captured public and [worldwide media attention](#) was the station's use of photos that had been posted on a Flickr page the station created ([Wildfires 2007 KPBS San Diego](#)).

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to gather and provide kinds of information that you could not obtain from conventional sources, especially hyper-local information that they are better able to obtain than your professional staff could, simply because of their greater numbers and geographic dispersion.

At the same time, the listener/journalists must learn something of the responsibilities of conventional journalism, and that this is not opinion-oriented blogging: the chances that their contributions will actually be used will be greater if they are introduced to and adopt the basics of news-gathering and journalistic standards. Distributing *The Huffington Post's* "[Citizen Journalism Publishing Standards](#)" can be a good starting point.

One fruitful area for discussion is the strengths and limitations of various types of social media and mobile devices, as outlined above. For example, geo-tagged photos and videos can be particularly informative: what kind of content should people try to include in such a video to make it informative? However they shouldn't be solicited or submitted (especially true with videos) if bandwidth is compromised.

Consider giving the attendees a .txt file with the Tweak the Tweet hashtags, discussing the tags, and then asking whether they can think of a way to create more shortcuts that would make information from citizen journalists more informative. This might spark further innovation that would make social media even more relevant in a disaster.

It's also important to make it clear to the attendees that you are not abdicating your responsibility as professional journalists. They must understand that you reserve the right to review all material that is submitted, and to unilaterally remove any material posted directly to your website that

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In a disaster of this sort, what listeners are most interested in is "hyperlocal" information, specifically, whether or not their houses had burned. By manually linking the photos to a Google Map using the geo-coding information on Flickr, the station made this critical information easily available, and it quickly became [an essential resource for both the public and officials](#). There were 1.7 million page views of the Google Map during the crisis.



*KPBS Wildfire Map*

The most prominent Twitter feed during the fires came from local web designer and activist Nate Ritter, who acted on his own. Caloh says that if there was a similar disaster in the future the station would reach out to people such as Ritter to supplement its own resources.

Note: KPBS News Director at the time of the fires, Michael Marcotte, has written and spoken extensively about the station's role in the wildfires. Working as an independent consultant with public media's Local News Initiative and [PRNDI](#), he created the Public Radio News Directors' Guide, which includes best practices on crisis coverage.



does not meet your journalistic standards (a succinct disclaimer on the site [\[22\]](#) will reinforce this point).

Don't forget to ask the attendees to also help you get information out during a disaster: each of them has their own social network, some of whose members may not already be among your listeners. These listeners' personal credibility may not only help you inform the public, but also increase your listener base.

## 6.2. Why wait for a crisis?

While its greatest benefit may come in a disaster, doing at least some crowdsourcing now can not only prepare for a disaster, but also provide a valuable adjunct to your current newsgathering. New York Public Radio pioneered this approach with its [“Your Uncommon Economic Indicators”](#) program (see sidebar). Using Crowdfunder to collect and organize on-the-scene reports from listeners on Election Day, for example, would be a simple way to begin the process in your own community.

## 6.3. When disaster strikes

Because communications volume was so high during the 2007 wildfires, KPBS realized its normal website would require too much bandwidth, so it switched to a bare-bones HTML site and then added the Twitter and Flickr streams that quickly made it the leading regional information source during the fire event. However, the development of Ushahidi's Crowdfunder since that time means that you could instantly offer such a service in a crisis through a simple link, and then listeners could post their tweets, sms messages and photos directly to the Crowdfunder.

One of the real advantages of social media and mobile apps is that if your news department has determined that it needs more information about a given area, you can send an alert via Twitter or sms text that will alert listeners in that area that you need their assistance, and give them a specific assignment: do you need to know what kind of damage has happened? Have people been hurt? Has an area flooded? This will allow your professional staff to concentrate their efforts elsewhere, bolstered by the citizen journalists.

Most of all, in a disaster, if you have solicited citizen journalist participation, make certain that someone on the staff is monitoring submissions, even if they do so only intermittently: nothing is worse than responding to a request for information and then feeling your efforts have been ignored or taken for granted. The same staffer can also review the citizen content for accuracy.

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[\[22\]](#) The Brian Lehrer Show addresses this issue with the following disclaimer: “WNYC is an organization committed to the highest journalistic ethics and programming standards and to independent, noncommercial journalism, both in fact and appearance. Stories submitted by project collaborators that appear on WNYC's Brian Lehrer Show crowd source reporting pages are anecdotal in nature and should not necessarily be expected to achieve the journalistic standards of WNYC.”

## Chapter 7. Resources

- [Crowdsourcing: a Fieldguide from WNYC](#)
- [CrisisCommons](#)
- [PublicMediaCamp](#)
- [KPBS use of social media during wildfires](#)
- [American Public Media Public Insight Journalism Project](#)
- [Instructions for WNYC “Uncommon Economic Indicators” project.](#)
- [Prof. Leysia Palen research on use of social media in disasters.](#)