

Public Communication in the Era of Twitter and Facebook

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During the Mumbai terrorist attacks, the social networking tool called Twitter came of age. Eyewitnesses during the height of the November 2008 tragedy in India sent over a dozen 'tweets' or short messages of up to 140 characters every second through their mobile phones and computers to their friends. Each message contained a keyword or 'hashtag', in this case #mumbai, so even people who did not have Twitter accounts could still search for the messages online.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) started incorporating some of the Twitter messages in their blow-by-blow accounts of the crisis, sparking a debate about whether the service can and should be used as a source for news. On one side was the purist view that tweets contain unverified information and have no place on television and in newspapers, which are supposed to be bastions of truth and accuracy. On the other side was the realist position that the "citizen journalism" of Twitter cannot be ignored because people want to be kept updated with the latest information even when the information has not been verified by professional journalists. Hence, the BBC argued, professional news organisations could use these sources as long as they are properly labelled -- and then let the audience decide what to make of the information.

The debate will continue as Twitter and other "Web 2.0" technologies like YouTube and blogging -- termed thus because they let everyone be producer and broadcaster -- become even more widely adopted. But journalists who include tweets into their reports will have to apply their professional scepticism about the truth and accuracy of the information. This means verifying especially important "facts" before they are put out to the world. Additionally, they will have to be stricter in letting through allegedly factual information than opinion, even though opinions may also be misleading in the sense that the person who uttered them may not be who or where he claimed to be.

The 24-hour news cycle -- the heightened pace of news in the new communications era -- has become even more frenzied with the latest generation of Web 2.0 services such as Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. The continuous flow of information from individuals and the Internet, especially in a crisis, feeds into the ever-frenetic news machinery which then feeds back to the flow of information in a tightening spiral. And when there is no information available, an "information vacuum" is created. The vacuum will unfortunately be filled by rumours and speculations and other unreliable material.

This has implications for public communication in times of emergency and crisis. What should government do when confronted by demands for official responses to unconfirmed rumours, information of which it only knows the partial picture, and unreliable information from outside sources? There are two things government can do.

The first is to answer all questions put to it by the mainstream media. This approach requires the government to speak not just about what it knows but also what it does not. The hitherto "prudent" approach of the government in talking only when it has the facts and ignoring the rumours made sense in the pre-Internet age when newspapers and television news bulletins came out a few times a day at most. Today, the 24-hour news cycle and Web 2.0-enabled information sharing have made these customary practices outmoded as any information hole does not stay empty for long, but is quickly filled by dubious and unsubstantiated information. When there is no information provided by the traditional sources such as television and newspapers, people will turn to new media channels where unreliable information have the room to thrive.

The government can fill that information vacuum and hence elbow out the misinformation and rumours with a simple strategy:

- a) When there is no information available, the government should say so, instead of just maintaining a silence.
- b) Government should say why it does not have the information at hand, and add that need to be examined.
- c) Government should say what it is doing in order to confirm or refute unsubstantiated information.

In the longer term, the government may have to consider whether it should not just engage the professional and mainstream media, but also the channels such as Twitter, by posting its own facts on these services.

The above is not saying that government should answer every query made by media about rumours, but only those that have an impact on public health, safety and law and order. Indeed there is a good case to be made that government should not dignify certain rumours or rumour-mongers. But with technological advances and changed circumstances, it is necessary to be innovative.

The second way in which government should change its public communication in the new environment is to give journalists direct access to people who can really answer their questions. Many “press spokesmen” or “spokeswomen” have only a limited remit and do not speak on all accounts for the agencies, ministries or ministers. Often times, they have a specific picture and only the specific details in that picture. Having such spokespersons may make sense for non-frontline agencies or for an earlier age when there was the luxury of time. But in emergency situations in the Internet age, that state of affairs will not be tenable because of the length of time needed to get a response out. In such situations, the chain of command that goes from the messenger to the senior official who decides on the message needs to be shortened, if not eliminated completely.

Indeed, during the Sars crisis, when the government decided that matters had become critical, daily press conferences were fronted by an individual no lesser than the Minister for Health. This way, crucial life-saving information was delivered to the media – and the country. The big picture was often conveyed by the Minister. Six years on after the Sars crisis, the game has changed further. The citizens are more well-informed and react quickly to news about their own safety and well-being. The technology for communication and other chores of daily life has advanced even more dramatically. Mainstream news channels are no longer the accepted source of information they used to be. In a contingency situation, media briefings held only once a day may not be sufficiently up to the minute. The turnaround has to be much faster.
