Crisis Communication & Social Media for Government Crisis Communicators

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This ebook was culled from several blog posts on the Professional Blog Service website, as well as several public health presentations, and original material written specifically for this book. It is designed as a basic introduction to social media, not the definitive word on the subject. For more information, use the resources on page 25, or contact Erik at erik@problogservice.com.

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Erik frequently speaks on blogging and social media, especially on the topics of citizen journalism and crisis communication.

I. The Role of Social Media in a National Toy Recall

Never doubt the power of a few well-connected people, or a confluence of timing, technology, and information, to have a huge impact on events around the world. I got to witness one of these events firsthand, and even played a very small role in it. You may remember it. It turned out to be one of the biggest lead-contaminated toy recalls in 2006, and one of the first in a long series of Chinese toy recalls that year.

In June 2006, I was the Risk Communication Director for the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH). Basically, I was in charge of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC), or as I called it, "oh shit" PR.

That's because whenever some emergency or crisis came up, those were the first two words any of us usually said.

We all did, the public affairs staff, the epidemiologists, even the Emergency Response department. Whether it was [a Hepatitis A scare at a Pizza Hut in Fort Wayne](), [salmonella in a Wal-Mart in Johnson County](), or [a national outbreak of salmonella in peanut butter](), we all had the same two-word response as soon as someone told us about the latest crisis.

I had been on the job for about three weeks, when I got a call that "we have a problem."

As part of a summer reading program, the Monroe County Library in Bloomington had been giving away bendable children's toys which were discovered to be dangerously contaminated with lead. So they contacted the ISDH to say they had just given out a bunch of lead-contaminated toys, and could we please help them get the word out to their community?

That's when we learned a second library in another county had also been giving away these toys, which made this a statewide issue. So we emailed a press release to all the state media outlets. That afternoon, I answered a few reporters' questions, and then forgot all about it.

Three days later, I got a call from the director of the New Jersey State Library Association.

It turns out the Muncie (Indiana) *Star-Press* had run our story, which was then picked up by a librarian blogger. The director from New Jersey read the blog and nearly freaked: they had been giving those toys out through a statewide children's reading program all summer.

Guess what two words I said, out loud, over the phone.

"You're telling me," he said. "What should we do?"

I ran through the talking points we had given out to the media, and recommended a few steps.

"Could you email that to me?" he asked. "I belong to a listserv* of librarians around the country. I think several of us have been giving out these toys. I can pass it on to them." (*A listserv is a subscription-based email discussion list centered around a certain topic or field. Messages and replies are sent to group members.)

I emailed him the talking points and some recommendations for the librarians, and forgot all about it again. Two days later, I received another phone call, this time from the *Orange County Register*.

The reporter said that several of California's libraries had been giving away some toys that were found to be contaminated with lead, and since we were the ones who had started this whole thing, did we have any information we could give them?

I explained how the whole thing had started with the nurse and librarian in Monroe County, and how the toys were apparently being found in a couple of states now.

"Oh, it's more than a couple now," said the Times reporter. Apparently, the number was in the 20s or 30s.

After I hung up, I said my two words again.

I began doing a daily Google search to see who else had been recalling these toys. Apparently, several librarians on the listserv had called their local media with the story, because they had been giving them out. In a couple cases, someone in one city would read the story and tell their librarian friends in another city, who would then find the listserv information, and call their media outlets.

The tipping point came when the Associated Press sent a national story over the newswire, and local reporters called their local libraries to see if they had those toys. The librarians would go pale and whisper my same two words. A quick check always revealed the very same toys for the very same children's reading program.

A few weeks later, we learned the final extent of the story: a national recall that recovered 385,000 lead-contaminated toys from all 50 states, and more than 530 news stories in the United States, Canada, Germany, England, Italy, India, and Taiwan.

But despite all the media coverage, this did not become a national recall just because of traditional media. They had help.

What really kicked it off is that a blogger saw an article in her local paper and wrote about it. Then a guy on an email listserv sent it out to the other members. Old-school media played an important part, but it was the new media — we weren't even calling it *social media* then — was the linchpin that pushed it in the right direction.

(But what really kicked it off was a nurse and a librarian who were concerned about the children in their community, and wanted to make sure they did the right thing. They received a special commendation from the State Health Commissioner, Dr. Judy Monroe, for it, and I got to be there when she awarded it to them. It was awesome.)

It's Time Crisis Communication Joined the 21st Century

When I left the State Health Department in 2007, we were still emailing press releases to newspapers, and TV and radio stations.

It's 2010, and it's still the standard operating procedure for news distribution. It's the same for a lot of other state and local government agencies as well.

The problem, says the Pew Internet & American Life Project, is that 61 percent of Americans get at least some of their news online. Their report, which was issued in March 2010, also showed the following:

- 78% of Americans say they get news from a local TV station
- 73% get news from a national network such as CBS, or a cable station such as CNN or FoxNews
- 54% listen to a radio news program at home or in the car
- 50% read news in a local newspaper
- 17% read news in a national newspaper such as the *New York Times* or *USA Today*.

This is not too discouraging for old school crisis communicators, but neither should it be too encouraging. What this means for communicators still relying on traditional media is that:

- While 78% of their citizens may be getting their news from a local TV station, the local TV stations don't have time to devote more than 1 - 3 minutes to your story.
- If 50% of the people get their news from a local newspaper, *50% do not.*
- 54% of the people listen to the news on the radio, but we don't know if it's national or local news, NPR or conservative talk radio. And given the demise of local radio news broadcasts, we're pretty confident the local news is not their coverage. In Indianapolis, our local NPR station gives us about 5 minutes per hour of local news. Another 5 minutes is dedicated to sports or business news.

It's obvious that if you want to get your story out, and you're relying on mainstream media, you're: 1) missing up to half of your audience, and 2) you're not getting enough time devoted to your story.

If you have a rather large crisis, like the H1N1 crisis we had in 2009, you need more than 1 - 3 minutes devoted to the issue per news broadcast, and all the facts that people need to know.

You need to start using social media as a way to reach the public without the filter or schedule of mainstream media.

II. Different Types of Crisis Communication

There are actually two different types of crisis communication: *corporate crisis communication* (CCC), and *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication* (CERC). In a CCC situation, a lot of money could be lost. In a CERC situation, a lot of people could die. Although these two types have a lot of similarities, there are some important differences.

Corporate crisis communication

I'd like to say that it's important to always tell the truth and to be as open and honest as possible. But being completely open and honest can ruin a company, so care must be taken. In CCC:

- **Transparency tends to go out the window.** The crisis is usually something that will make the corporation look bad, so the first instinct is to hunker down and contain it, which means trying to keep it under wraps. This hardly ever works.
- **The negative end result of a corporate crisis is a loss of money.** It could be a hit to their reputation, credibility, or branding, but those will all affect the bottom line. Since that can be millions of dollars, CCC should not be taken lightly. But a reluctance to communicate can anger the public, which makes the damage more extensive, so it should not be ignored either.
- **Communication is about containment.** Many CCC pros are focused on keeping their client from being found guilty or negligent. They're not worried about whether people like them, they just want to win the pending lawsuits. This will greatly affect their messaging and the information they release.
- **The message is the biggest part of the response.** There are other things going on behind the scenes — product recall, legal preparations, brand management — but it's communication that affects the public's reaction.

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

CERC is almost the exact opposite of CCC. We want open communication. More is better, and there is no such thing as being too honest. With CERC:

- **Transparency is crucial.** This is information people need to know. Information about where to go for safety, supplies, or medication.
- **The negative end result of a public crisis is a loss of life.** The goal of CERC is to tell as many people as possible about important information.
- **Communication is widespread.** The point of CERC is to get as much information out as possible, and to correct misinformation. There is nothing that should be contained or covered up.
- **The message supports the rest of the response.** The other things — law enforcement, public health response, rescue/recovery, clean-up — affect the public, but it's communication that lets us know what's happening.

This ebook is written for the CERC communicator, although the techniques can be used by the CCC communicator. We are assuming we want as much communication as possible, as frequently as possible. We're not worried about "causing panic" (my CERC veterans know what I'm talking about!), and for the most part, we believe more communication is better.

This is the assumption we're working under in this book

III. Why Is Social Media Important?

Here's how traditional communication with mainstream media usually works:

1) An incident pops up, and you write a press release in response. Your deadline for the local paper is 3:00; the news channels need to finish their interviews by 3:00, so they can make the evening news.

2) The local news comes on at 5:00, 6:00, and 11:00. Most people are driving home at 5:00, and are eating dinner at 6:00. The final news of the day is 11:00, 8 hours after you finished your interview, and gave them your release.

3) The morning newspaper isn't delivered until 5:00 the next day, and most people start reading around 6:00 or later. In other words, the earliest people can read your story is 14 – 15 hours — actually a whole day — after you sent out your release.

And there's the problem. If you have time sensitive news, like H1N1 or an anthrax attack, you can't wait 2 to 4 to 8 to 15 hours to reach the people who need to hear the news *immediately*.

But what if the incident happens at 9 am, and send your release at 10 am? Now you've got a 19 hour wait for newspaper coverage, a 7 hour wait for the 5:00 news, but only a 2 hour wait for the noon news. (Of course, nearly everyone is at work, and can't watch it...)

According to Strategic National Stockpile requirements, during a public health crisis or terrorist biological attack, a state health department must get the necessary medication into the hands of the last person in line within 48 hours. Do you really want to spend the first 19 of that waiting for a list of PODs (Points of Dispensing) to come out in the newspaper? (I didn't think so.)

Remember, 61% of the public gets some of their news online. They're not waiting 2 hours your press release to get published. They're not waiting 2 minutes. They're getting their news from online sources, they're getting it from each other, or they're getting it from people who give misleading and false information. They're posting questions on Twitter and Facebook, and other people are answering them, filling the 2 –19 hour void you've created by waiting for the media to publish.

The first three principles of CERC are to *be first, be right, be credible*. But 2 hours isn't first. It's not even third. You may be more right than anyone else, but if you're not first, you won't be credible.

Note:
This does *not* mean I think you should abandon your regular media program. While 50% of people don't read newspapers, 50% still do; 61% of people get some of their news online, but 39% do not.

So, as you read the rest of this e-book, please keep in mind that I want you to continue doing your current media relations program. Just add social media to the mix.

Social media is breaking the news before the news

There have been several instances where social media broke news stories before mainstream media ever picked it up. The three most notable examples have been:

1. The first images after the Haiti earthquake were on Twitter, because mainstream media couldn't get on the ground. People with cell phones were sending photos to Twitter and Facebook, and they spread like wildfire. My family was particularly interested in one set of missionaries in Port-au-Prince, and @TroyLiveSay was providing information we couldn't get anywhere else.

2. Moments after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India, news was spreading on Twitter before the shots had even stopped.

3. When US Airways flight 1549 landed in the Hudson in 2009, news had broken on Twitter *15 minutes* before the first news reports hit the airwaves. In fact, nearly 35 minutes after Janis Krums sent his history-making tweet, he was on MSNBC being interviewed as a witness.

None of these examples are a failing of the mainstream media. Rather, it shows the speed with which regular people broke the news first because of the widespread nature of social media. They couldn't wait for the media to show up, so they reported the news themselves.

Mainstream media is not going anywhere anytime soon, but crisis communicators need to realize that people are not depending on the media to give us the news.

We're getting it from each other.

So, where will we get *your* news? From a newspaper or TV station with hours-old information? Or will we get it directly from *you*, with the latest, most up-to-date information.

IV. Social Media Strategies

Okay, if you're reading this far, you're interested in the topic (or you're my mom). You realize that you can't rely strictly on the mainstream media to get your information out. There's more to your crisis than they have time and space for in their broadcast or paper. So you need a way to get your information out to the public, without the filter and inflexible schedule of the mainstream media.

(Plus, if you do it right, you'll end up being a bigger source *for* the media, which will actually make your job easier. Reporters won't have as many questions, they'll get the information right from your website, which means you'll field fewer phone calls.)

To be an effective social media communicator, you need to be able to respond quickly. You need to get ahead of the rumor mill, which can hurt your efforts. This means you should start building your social media network now, before there ever is a crisis. Create trust and relationships with the people you want to reach during a crisis, and they'll be more willing to listen to you when you need them to.

A. 8 Essential Tools for Crisis Communicators

These are eight tools that every crisis communication pro should have in his or her toolbox.

1) Blog: Your blog is the hub for your social media campaign. It's the place where you drive everyone through the rest of your social media communication efforts — everything else is the spokes. It's a way to provide the latest information and numbers quickly. Your readers can subscribe to your blog feed and be automatically notified whenever you publish a new post.

Your blog is a place to post your press releases, direct-to-consumer news releases (more on that in Section V: *Blogging for Public Relations & Community Relations*), fast updates on statistics, changes in scope or spread, and even information on medication dispensing.

The blog is the ideal way to get content out to the public. Treat it as the anchor for all of your communication efforts.

2) Twitter: Twitter lets you reach people quickly and easily. Follow important people who might need to hear your news: journalists, citizens, other first responders, other government agencies, etc. They'll follow you back, and you can share information and news.

Don't just use Twitter for blasting out news. Have conversations with people, establish relationships, provide valuable information, answer questions, and just let others know you're a real person.

People are communicating all the time on Twitter, as many as 50 million messages per day. People are asking and answering questions, forwarding interesting blog and news articles to each other, and having conversations.

When the H1N1 epidemic broke out in 2009, people were discussing the cases, whether it would reach their state or city, and asking all kinds of questions. Some people were answering them, but not everyone was providing correct information.

Twitter is a great way to disseminate information quickly, by spreading messages virally, and squelching rumors and misinformation quickly. If you arm people with information, they'll take it upon themselves to make sure it reaches as many people as possible.

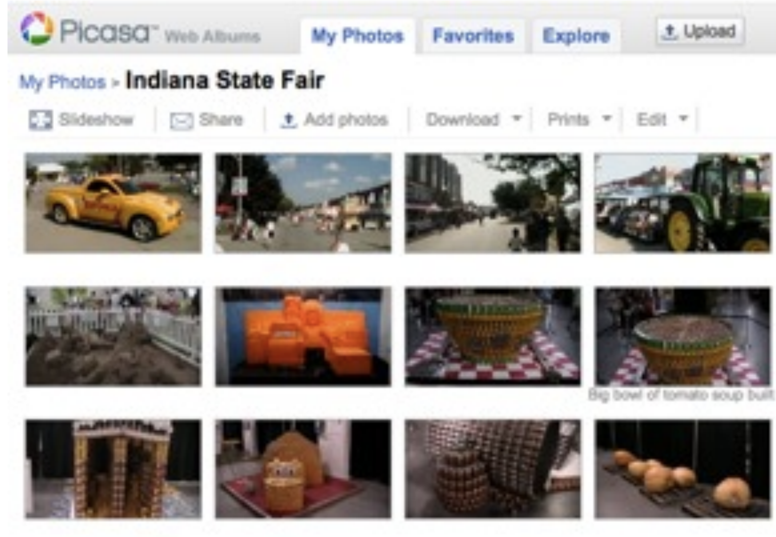
3) Facebook Page: Even a government agency needs their own page. If you have one, it's one more channel for reaching your audience. Run your blog and Twitter feeds through your page. It may seem repetitive, but not everyone uses all their social networks at the same time. People get their news from different sources, and they get their social media from different tools. So you need to match their information-gathering habits.

You can get fairly sophisticated by creating your own custom Facebook page, using FBML (Facebook Markup Language, the Facebook equivalent of HTML). FBML lets you do things like allow people to share the page with their friends, add multimedia to a page, and monitor page visits with Google Analytics.

4) Analytics and News Alerts: You need to see how your page is faring with visitors, so put some Google Analytics on your blog. It's lightweight, and only updates every 24 hours, but it's free, and it's suitable if you're not trying to monitor things in real time.

My company uses Yahoo Analytics, a paid service, because it has real-time updates, and we can graph everything out. But if you've got the budget, and have a statewide or even national reach, try Radian6 or ScoutLabs. They're expensive, but they'll let you see what people are saying in the social media stream.

Also go to www.google.com/alerts, and set up Google News Alerts for your agency and the crisis you're dealing with (i.e. "H1N1 and Indiana"). They'll email you as little as once a week and as frequently as "as we find it" with any news articles, blog posts, and websites that have information you need to know or respond to.



5) Flickr or Picasa: Sharing photos is important during a news event. A picture can truly be worth a thousand words. It can shared via email, Twitter, or SMS, viewed on a cell phone, and placed into a blog post. String a bunch of them together in a slide show, and you can embed the entire collection into your blog.

The two most popular photo sharing sites are Flickr, which is owned by Yahoo, and Picasa, which is owned by Google. There are others, but these are the most popular and easiest to use. Both are equally good, but Flickr will only allow you to have three photo albums for their free service, while Picasa seems to allow as many as you need.

As the communicator, you need to take photos of the crisis (if possible), the response, medication distribution, etc. Share them with the public and the media. Show the rest of the world how you're dealing with the crisis, and the public will continue to have faith in you.

To speed up the uploading process, get an *EyeFi Card*, a small *wifi-enabled* storage card for your digital camera. You can set it up to automatically transmit your photos to your Flickr or Picasa account, assuming you have a wifi signal nearby.

If you don't, Verizon has the *MiFi*, a mobile wifi hotspot about the size of a smartphone that you carry with you You can hook your EyeFi card into the MiFi (metaphorically speaking), and beam all your photos to your photo site. You don't have to deal with downloading photos to your computer and then uploading them to the site. This is great for rapid response communication.

6) YouTube: Video is becoming very important to crisis communicators. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then video is worth a thousand pictures. Imagine being able to interview first responders and officials who can give you the most up-to-date information, and then sharing that immediately with the public. No media filter, no editing out important information for the sake of time. Upload the video to YouTube, embed it in a blog post, and share them both via Twitter and Facebook.

Video is widely used in sales, marketing, public relations, education — you name it, video is some of the most popular online content, so there's no reason you can't use it too. For example, the Indiana Department of Tourism has begun using video on its tourism blog, and their video posts receive the most visits of any of their posts. (Full disclosure: I'm a travel blogger for the Tourism website.)

Your typical smartphone — iPhone, Android — has a built-in video camera. Even some of the newer Blackberries have them. And you can upload videos directly to YouTube from your phone.

You can also use regular digital cameras, or get a Flip camera for around $150. Just shoot the video, and upload it to your computer. Do a quick edit with Windows MovieMaker or Apple iMovie, and upload the finished product to YouTube.

Set your YouTube channel to notify your social networks when there are new videos available. So shoot an interview with the Incident Commander about your agency's response, upload it, and automatically notify the public via Twitter and Facebook. Then, go online, embed the video into a blog post, add some commentary, publish it, *and tell the public again*. The media will be able to access the video, and the public can see it directly.

7) A Gmail account: I can't say enough about the importance of having a web-based email account as a backup. There were a couple of times at the health department that I was nearly locked out of my work email, only because my laptop wasn't handy. That's where I kept my email and address book. We had everything backed up on a separate server, but since all the login information was kept on my laptop. . . well, you begin to see the problem.

A Gmail account would have solved the problem. By backing up my entire media database into the Gmail contact file, I could have sent out press releases and communicated with the media from anywhere. You can log in from any computer to access Gmail. Plus, any new networks you join allow you to import your address book. The #1 address book they *all* love to import? Gmail.

8) A laptop and wifi network card: This one seems so painfully obvious, it's ridiculous to even include it. But you'd be amazed at the number of organizations still running on desktops, or using laptops without wifi. It's great to be able to visit any location with free wifi and log in — I wrote this section while sitting at a Subway restaurant, using the neighborhood's free wifi — but what do you do in an emergency if the wifi is down, or you're in an area that doesn't have it. What do you do if you're a field operative for a government agency, responding to a local emergency, and the fastest Internet connection is the dial-up credit card machine at the gas station? (This is where the *MiFi* card from #5 will come in handy.)

Beg, borrow, or steal a laptop and wifi card from your boss, and then learn how to use it, because the other tools, including the old-school ones, are useless if you're ever caught in an emergency without a computer and Internet access.. Get comfortable with the mobile setup, so during an emergency, you don't have to pull out the manual just to figure out how to use the wifi card. There are more tools you'll be able to use, most of them supporting any of these basics, but these are the ones you can use to build an entire crisis communication plan.

B. 8 Steps to Set Up Your Social Media Platform

1) Get a Twitter account and pick a short name. If you're tweeting for an organization, use that name. If it's personal, use yours. If it's for a particular issue, use that term in your username, like IN_SwineFlu or AZ_SwineFlu. Start telling everyone that's what you're using. Include it in your email footers, in your press releases, and even during press conferences.

Pick a short, easy to understand name, because you only have 140 characters to communicate. If someone wants to send a tweet with your name in it, you cut down on their available characters with a long name. @RhodeIslandHealthDepartment is a little too big (28 characters). But @RIHD doesn't tell people who you are. Try @RIHealthDept.

2) Download TweetDeck from www.TweetDeck.com and use it for Twitter communication (don't use the Twitter.com interface). Create a column of people in a particular group (e.g. other first responders), and a column for keywords for your incident and your community. *Be sure to use the terms* *people are using, not the terms you're using*. During the first days of H1N1, more people were talking about "swine flu," not H1N1. It took a few weeks for the media, and later, regular people to stop calling it swine flu. If you're worried about seeing all the important tweets, create two columns.

3) Find people to follow. Twitterment (www.Twitterment.com) and NearbyTweets (www.NearbyTweets.com) are great tools for this. Type in the city or keywords, and these sites will find twitterers in that area. Use Twellow (www.Twellow.com) to follow people in your field or industry. Most will follow you back, especially if your Twitter name and bio explains who you are.

4) Use bit.ly (www.Bit.ly) to shorten your URLs for Twitter. This turns 70-character URLs into 20 characters, which saves a lot of space. It's also the default URL for TweetDeck, so any time you paste a long URL into it, TweetDeck will shorten it for you.

5) Use bit.ly's home page to analyze your Twitter click-throughs. This will tell you if you're being effective. Even the URLs you shorten through TweetDeck get immediately transferred to the bit.ly site, and you can track the click-throughs. When you look at the results, you'll see two numbers. The top number is how many visitors you sent to that link, and the bottom number is how many people went to that page via *any* bit.ly link.

6) Tie your blog into Twitter with TwitterFeed (www.TwitterFeed.com). Whenever you post a new blog post, the headline and URL will be automatically tweeted for you. With some blogs, you can even post entries and photos from your cell phone or Blackberry.

7) Set up a Facebook page, and use it to post announcements, news, and answer questions. We discussed this in the previous section. Feed your blog into your Facebook page.

8) Set up a YouTube channel. We discussed this in the previous section too.

9) Avoid the urge to join as many social networks as you can, but rather focus your attention on the two biggest for your population, Twitter and Facebook. You'll have a much deeper reach if you pour your attention into one network. Having 500 followers on one network is better than having 50 on 10 networks, because they will probably be the same 50.

C. 8 Ways To Improve CERC Response with Social Media

1) Jump out in front of the communication wave. Last year, when the first news of H1N1 hit on that Friday, there was no news from the state until Sunday afternoon — 48 hours later. After that, they seemed to spend the rest of their time playing catchup, rarely pushing news out to the media, or letting the local health departments get their news out first. By not being first, they missed a great opportunity to be the go to source for the public and the media.

2) Create a series of communication and press release templates. Or at least a formula. Most of the initial communication in any crisis is pretty standard. You can guess what the situation is going to be, create a basic press release with some fill-in-the-blank answers, and fill them in when the crisis finally hits. This will save time in trying to write one in the heat of the moment.

3) Create a specific website for the emergency. Purchase a domain name with the issue and your state or city: www.indianaswineflu.com, www.fortwaynehepatitis.com, etc. Create different pages for FAQs, a list of community resources, links to other sites, like the CDC or DHS. Link back to it on other sites and networks. This helps with search results, plus it gives basic updates and much-needed answers to the public. Include other things like YouTube videos and a plug-in for your Twitter feed on the home page. This makes it a more valuable resource, and people will return for more information. Your site will become the information clearinghouse for everything about the crisis.

If necessary, just create a single page (also called a microsite) about the crisis, again using the specific issue and city/state name, with links pointing back to your websites. Include an explanation of the crisis, and where to find more information (i.e. your website). Include links that lead back to your site, and include the videos and Twitter feed plug-in as well. This will also improve your search engine performance, which makes you more easily found.

4) Call the emergency what other people are calling it. People and the media started referring to last year's H1N1 epidemic as "swine flu," and it was only some serious lobbying from the pork industry that made the journalists change their designation to "H1N1." Calling it the "North American Human Influenza" strain — which some people tried, and thankfully failed — will only confuse the public, and they won't follow suit, no matter how much you insist. Listen to what the people are calling it, and follow their lead. If you need to call it by its official name, make sure you're using both names in news releases and in blog posts.

5) Set up a Twitter account for only one agency. There is no reason for two responding agencies to share an account. That makes it unclear to the public who is actually controlling the message, and who is the best resource for information. Decide well in advance which agency will handle the social media campaign (you want it to be you), and then stick to it. The other agency can contribute to your account, or even create their own, especially if they serve a different audience (like the Board of Animal Health and the Department of Public Health).

But, let me reiterate: under no circumstances should two agencies share a single account. This stuff is free, so it's not like this is going hurt anyone's budget. But sharing an account will wreck your response.

6) Follow the public on Twitter. It's considered bad form to only follow a few people while expecting a lot of people to follow you. But if you start following people first, they'll follow you back. You can then communicate with these people more easily, and keep up with their questions and conversations during the incident. I mentioned Twitterment.com, NearbyTweets.com, and Twellow.com as a way to find people to follow. Make sure you follow people in your community, your field (i.e. other government communicators), and the media.

7) Begin communicating with people NOW. The time to start a crisis communication plan is not when an emergency starts, it's now. The same is true for your social media campaign. You need to get it in place, and start expanding your network, adding friends and followers, and communicating with people via these channels. Once they know this is a way you'll communicate with them, they will come to expect it. Run drills on your social media platforms, communicate everyday events, and even have conversations with journalists and citizens. The more you use it, the easier it will be to implement when the real emergency comes along. If you wait until an emergency begins to start using it, you'll lose traction and time, and spend most of your time just trying to figure it out. (That's not to say it can't be done, it will just be hard.)

V. Blogging Strategies

A. Blogging Software Review

The great thing about blogging is that you don't need special software on your computer. There are web-based blogging platforms, and you just use theirs. If you want to tie yours in to your agency website, that's fine. It just needs to be downloaded to your web server. But if your IT department can be a little sticky, there's no reason you have to wait around for them. Use one of the free offsite platforms, and you're not locked out of your own site and blog by a finicky IT staffer who decides to take a power trip while you're trying to communicate with an anxious public.

There are actually close to 40 different blogging platforms, some free, some paid. There are pros and cons to each, and people will argue as fervently about their favorite as if it were a political discussion. I happen to like Blogger, WordPress, and Posterous. I use Blogger for my personal blog, and WordPress for my work blog. I use Posterous to demonstrate rapid blogging at conferences.

Blogger is a good program because it's easy to use, and because Google owns it. If you have a Google account on anything — Gmail, Google Docs, Picasa — you have access to all Google properties under that name and password. Blogger, which is also called Blogspot.com, is the most popular platform in the entire world.

WordPress is great if you are technically minded, want to add a lot of functionality to your blog through plug-ins, and have the time to devote to it. I have a friend who swears by WordPress, and loves it so much that if he can't find a plug-in that he needs, he writes his own. WordPress is the most popular blog platform in the United States

(**Note:** There are two versions of WordPress: .com and .org. WordPress.com is a hosted blog, like Blogger. Your blog lives on their server, and has limited, but very good, capabilities. WordPress.org is the software that you load onto another server somewhere else. This is the best option, especially if you've got the server space and a cooperative IT department.)

Posterous: I've been using Posterous as a platform for rapid response and crisis communication professionals. If this is you, I would strongly consider it. You email your posts to your email address (it's actually just post@posterous.com), your subject line is your headline, you attach any photos or videos, type and format your content in your text box, and *voila!* You've got a blog post sent from your smart phone or Blackberry.

Now, you can Post By Email on Blogger and WordPress.com; WordPress.org has a plug-in that will allow you to do it. But Posterous is designed specifically for this purpose. It will also forward other content on to other services. Email photos to Posterous, and it will send them to your Flickr and Picasa account. Email a video to Posterous, and it will add it to your YouTube account. Blogger and WordPress don't do that. You can even have your Posterous blog repost content to your Blogger and WordPress blogs.

Set up a blog on the platform of your choice. Unless you managed to sweet talk your IT department to install WordPress.org on your site, use one of the other three. You'll end up with a domain name like WashingtonStateHealthDeparment.wordpress.com, but that's okay.

If you need to solidify your brand, and don't want Blogger.com or WordPress.com to be part of your web address, buy a domain name from someone like GoDaddy.com (like MaineHealthDepartmentBlog.com). Forward the new domain to your website, and publicize it.

If you're technically inclined, and have some money to spend on web hosting, you can purchase a small server space on GoDaddy for as low as $4 per month. You can then load WordPress.org for free, and maintain it yourself. This will give you the greatest flexibility in design and added features.

B. Blogging Basics

What should I write about?

That's easy enough. Find an article about a new development in your field, summarize it in 150 words, and give your opinion for another 150. Link to the article, plus a couple other related articles. You can take 15 minutes or 60, depending on how much effort you want to put into one post.

Write about developments in your agency, about your particular crisis, or about developments related to the crisis before it ever happens. Remember, you want to be **first**, and the best way to be first is to get a head start on everyone else by writing about the crisis before it ever begins.

How should I write it?

Tell stories. We love stories. Knowledge has been passed down through stories, generation to generation, century to century. It's imprinted in our DNA. This is why testimonials and case studies are so effective in marketing campaigns. Use stories whenever possible to make your point, like the one I did at the beginning of this ebook.

Be informal. Adopt an informal writing style. Write posts more like an email, rather than academic-sounding articles. A light-hearted or informal style is more enjoyable to read. It also makes people like and respect you more as a real person and an authority. If your posts sound academic and officious, you'll be ignored.

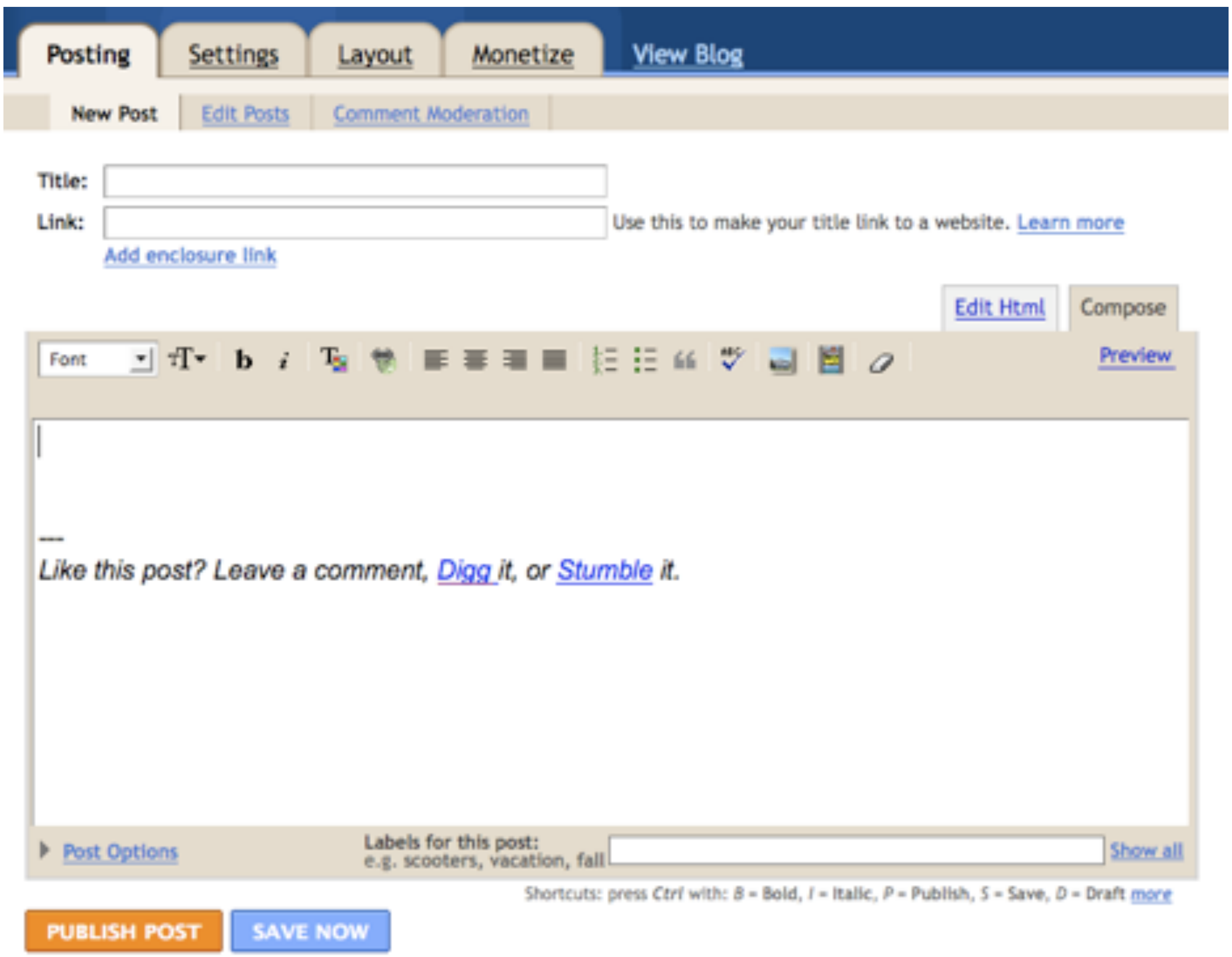
Even if you write about a complicated topic like the epidemiological patterns of norovirus, use simple language so you can reach everyone ("How Stomach Virus Spreads"). You don't have to sound like an official government report or graduate paper. Studies have shown that even the smartest readers like things made easier to read. It requires less cognitive processing, which means they're more likely to read, comprehend, and remember your posts, and to come back for more later.

Avoid jargon and scientific or government language. You don't talk about "ideating mission-critical functionalities" in real-life conversations with friends and family, so don't write that way either. (And if you do talk that way, stop it.) Use real words, not nouns-turned-into-verbs or jargon.

When should I post?

Once a day would be excellent, above and beyond the call of duty. Two or three times a week is pretty good. But once a week is the bare minimum. When an emergency hits, several times a day is not out of the question.

Posting is very easy. In fact, it's so easy, if you can send an email, you can write a blog post. The posting window even looks like an email window.



How long should a post be?

The average post should run between 200 - 400 words, longer posts should be 500 words, about the length of the average newspaper column. Just don't write 5,000 word manifestos that take three hours to read. You can say a lot in just 300 words.

That's not to say your posts absolutely always have to be 300 words – 1,500 words are fine at times. Just make sure you've got the content, and more importantly, the ability to do it well. If you can say it in 300 words, do it. If you need 1,500, use 1,500.

The best reason to keep posts short is time. You don't want to spend 2 - 3 hours writing a single post. Just dash it off as quickly as you would write an email, check it for typos and grammatical errors (you can go back and fix them if you need to), and publish it.

Who should write our posts?

You and anyone else you can get to write should be your writers. Like the subject matter experts who are already writing emails about the incident. People in departments affected by the crisis. First responders and emergency managers who need something to do.

There should be no magic test for people to be able to write. If you want some added safeguards, give the other writers enough access to submit the posts as a draft, but you are responsible for editing and publishing them.

C. Blogging for Public Relations & Community Relations

The big move in Internet marketing and PR is to move away from press releases, and to focus more on *direct-to-consumer news releases*. These are different from press releases, which are sent to the media. News releases, as I'm going to call them because the other name is too long, are written for the general public, not journalists. Hence, calling this section Public Relations & *Community Relations*.

These news releases are written like informal news articles, but they focus on keywords to improve search engine performance (press releases don't focus on keywords and search engines). This makes the news releases accessible to the general public, which they will be more likely to share, as well as believe and accept. Since CERC is about being first, right, and credible, a well-written news release or blog post can go a long way in establishing that.

Your news releases can also serve as information to the mainstream media (remember, we're still including them in our media efforts), so it's important you follow some basic blog writing techniques. I think it’s important that bloggers learn to write like newspaper writers.

(As an added bonus, the media *will* want to use your news releases as well. If you can use these methods, they'll be more likely to pick up your information.)

Here are a few ways you can improve your blog posts and have it read more like a newspaper article.

Write in Newspaper Style

This means the most important information goes first, second most important goes next, and so on. It's the inverted pyramid style. After a certain point, usually around the halfway mark, you start seeing more of the inside information, background story, etc., and the story gets boring.

Newspapers are written this way, because readers usually abandon a story when it gets boring. They also abandon it because it's too long.

So with a blog post, you need to end the post before you get to the boring part. When you start writing background information, or repeating old information, stop. Don't write a post that's long enough for people to get bored. Instead, put a "To learn more about this issue, check out these previous posts" section with links to older stories.

One of my favorite plugins to help with this is Zemanta (www.zemanta.com), which you can add to a WordPress blog, or install as a plugin if you're using the Firefox web browser*. (*If you're not using Firefox, I recommend you get it, especially if you're using Internet Explorer. You can download Firefox at www.firefox.com. It's more stable, less prone to viruses, and has all sorts of functionality you can add through plugins.)

Short words. Short sentences. Short paragraphs.

Despite what my 7th grade English teacher said, it's perfectly all right to have a one word paragraph.

See?

By breaking things up, and making them easier to read, we're more likely to continue on. We glance ahead and see all the short paragraphs and think, "that's not so hard. I can go a little longer." Pretty soon, "a little longer" turns into "the entire story."

Negative Space = Readability

One of the reasons newspapers are tough to read is the lack of negative space (that's fancy graphic designer talk for "spaces between paragraphs"). All the paragraphs are crammed together, which can make for some tiring reading.

Our eyes and our brains need a break from all the text running together, so we look for that break by switching to other stories, abandoning the one we were just reading. But if you can provide some extra relief with some white space, that will help propel readers forward.

This is also why one word paragraphs are acceptable.

Create a Powerful Lead

Not every blog post has to have a Pulitzer-quality opening, but it doesn't hurt to have something that's attention getting and informative.

Remember, a newspaper article's job is to get you to read the first sentence. The first sentence's job is to get you to read the second sentence, and so on. So your lead had better be a doozy.

Write For a Clever 12-Year-Old

It's the newspaper industry's dirty little secret that they write for a 6th grade education and attention span. (Don't feel too insulted; TV news is produced at a 4th grade level.) That's why the important stuff is at the front of the story. Bloggers need to do this too.

It's not that your readers are stupid, or can't understand big words. It's that we just don't want to devote the mental resources and energy to decoding really long and complicated words. Even academic journals written by and for Ph.Ds in an academic field are considered "better" if they're written at a high school level instead of a post-graduate level.

So eschew polysyllabic declarations; use short words instead.

It's also important that you explain new terms. Assume that your story is going to be read by someone who is experiencing this issue for the very first time. Don't assume knowledge on their part, don't assume they know as much about the story as you do. So be sure to explain it like you're telling that 12-year-old for the first time. Don't use jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations unless you explain them.

For example, newspaper style requires you spell out what a term means, followed by the acronym/ abbreviation in parentheses. That tells the reader you're going to use it from then on in the story.

```
"The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has said
they're shipping necessary medications to Des Moines immediately."
```

Afterward, I can use CDC in the post wherever I want.

Important: when you write a new post, you have to assume a whole new set of readers. You can't assume that the readers of *this* posts also read your *last* post. You have to assume that the new readers are coming there for the very first time, which means you have to spell everything out again, just like we discussed above.

VI. Twitter Strategies

A. How to use Twitter to Monitor Emergencies

(This section was written originally for local health departments in Indiana, but it's applicable to any government agency.)

We occasionally did exercises with the Indiana Department of Homeland Security, and they had an expensive piece of software that was supposed to monitor all communication about an incident, but it was heavy and cumbersome and a general pain to learn, let alone use. You could input new information, sort of like a wiki*, but it was awkward to access, and you couldn't easily find the information if you weren't familiar with it. (*A wiki is a database of interconnected web pages designed to share information, like Wikipedia. They are created and written by the people who use them. You can find free wiki software online, but the best ones have a license fee.)

With the increased popularity of Twitter, it has become an important tool for anyone in the crisis response business to use. And since many first responders still use BlackBerries, this is still a viable option.

So how can every local health department (LHDs) in the state use Twitter to keep up with what's going on in your district, the state, or even the country. Here's a step by step process of what to do, what to use, and where to find it.

1) Set up a Twitter account for your LHD. Go to Twitter.com, using your county and title. If you're the Local Public Health Coordinator (LPHC) for Clark County, register as Clark_LPHC. If you work for the state, use the agency acronym and your title (ISDH_RiskComm). This makes it easy for people to see where you're from, and what you do, plus, it makes you NIMS compliant.

Be sure to fill out your bio, including your role and the name of your local health department, and your state. Try to avoid abbreviations like LPHC, in your bio.

"*Bob Smith is the Local Public Health Coordinator for the Clark County Health Department in Indiana.*"

If you want to set up a personal account, be sure to use your home or private email. Don't tie it in to your work account. If you leave the position, you don't want to lose access to this account. (See the section on Gmail on page 12.)

For training exercises and real emergencies, it's helpful to set up accounts for the different NIMS roles (e.g. ISDH_command is the Incident Commander for the Indiana State Department of Health). As the shifts change, make sure the new people have the correct usernames and passwords.

IMPORTANT: During setup, click the Protect My Updates box if you want to keep your tweets (Twitter messages) private. This may be important for behind-the-scenes communication during an emergency. If you want the public to be able to follow you, consider setting up an account for the whole department (ClarkCounty_HD). Also, make sure the PIOs have public accounts.

2) Follow other LHDs. Use "Public Health" and your state in your search terms. Follow those people. You will also receive an email whenever someone follows you. If you protected your account, you'll need to approve them before you can communicate with them.

3) Download TweetDeck. Create different columns to collect groups of people you follow, as well as search terms. Create a group for your district, and one for your county emergency response departments (because you're going to get them to use this, right?). Keep it open on your laptop at all times, and use it as often as possible. (That's because TwitterBerry, the Blackberry's Twitter client, is not so great, although it will do in a pinch. You're better off trying to use TweetDeck.)

4) Consider using GroupTweet. GroupTweet.com is a web-based service that lets you send messages to an entire group, rather than sending something to all your followers, or typing in their names one at a time. If you need to send a message to, say, an entire POD or the entire EOC, set up a group in advance, and assign all the members of that group. Then, when you need to send a message to only those people, follow GroupTweet's instructions.

5) Set up a laptop running TweetDeck with an LCD projector. Log in with a general/public account and show the most important columns on the wall, like tweets to the public account, a group of other first responders, and a search column for the important keywords ("swine flu AND Indiana" or "#h1n1"). Make sure everyone can see it, but try to squeeze as many tweets on the wall as you can. (Use the display settings in the Control Panel.) This way if everyone working in the EOC is using the EOC software, as well as their own Twitter account, they will be able to see the Twitter stream on the wall. They will also be able to respond to the messages from their own station. This is also an important way for the PIO to monitor Twitter traffic on the incident.

You can also use Twitter's search function this way at http://search.Twitter.com.

6) Use the # hashtag, especially if your accounts are public, or you have certain NIMS roles who are communicating publicly**.** This will let the media and the public also monitor what you're doing. Anyone who is using the #hashtag will show up in the general Twitter timeline through Twitter's search function at search.Twitter.com or a TweetDeck search column (they show the same feed. There are not separate feeds for each program).

B. Scenario: How Twitter Can Work During an Emergency

Let's see how we can use Twitter to communicate during an emergency.

Scenario: During a POD deployment in Clark County, you've got too many volunteers in one POD, you're running out of medication at another, and a TV news crew is on site, but the Clark County PIO is not available.

Normally to handle this, the Operations Officer from Pod #1 would have to call the EOC to find out if they need to redeploy the volunteers. Someone else would call to get more medicine. A third person would be frantically trying to track down the PIO, racing around to find her. I've been in situations where all these things are playing out simultaneously, and it's often hard to get an answer because everyone is searching for their own answer, or are off working on their own part of the incident, and can't be found.

While Twitter won't eliminate this problem, it can help alleviate some of this chaos by making information more readily available. Here's how:

The volunteer supervisor sends a Tweet, followed by a response from the EOC Incident Commander. The other communication happens publicly (or at least in the protected Twitter stream), for everyone involved to see:

> **Clark_VolSup:** @ClarkCoPOD1 has 12 too many volunteers? Send home or send elsewhere?
>
> **ISDH_Command:** @Clark_VolSup, First Haven Church needs new volunteers. Send 8 there. The rest can go home.
>
> **Clark_VolSup:** They're on their way.
>
> **ClarkCoPOD1:** We're running low on Doxycyclin, and will be out in 2 hours. Does anyone have more?
>
> **ClarkCoPOD3:** We have plenty. We'll send a volunteer with 5 cases.
>
> **ClarkCoPOD2:** Sorry, we've got just enough. Might run short near end of day.
>
> **ClarkCoPOD1:** Channel 4 from Louisville is on site. Can't find @Clark_PIO. Does anyone know where she is?
>
> **ISDH_PIO:** @Clark_PIO is caught in traffic. I'm on site, and can handle.
>
> **ClarkCoPOD1:** We've just sent processed our 10,000th person. How's everyone else doing?
>
> **ClarkCoPOD3:** We've had 8,000.
>
> **ClarkCoPOD2:** We've had 12,000.
>
> **ISDH_PIO:** Can I share this with the media? Any talking points I should give?
>
> **EOC_OPS:** @ISDH_command says Yes. 30K people through PODs, everything running smooth, enough meds for all. All PODs should finish by 10 pm today.
>
> **ISDH_PIO:** Understood. I'll call @ISDH_command when interview is done.

This short exchange has accomplished a number of things:

1. They saved a bunch of phone calls, and chasing down different people to get an answer. In fact, the information was probably seen more easily because someone can just see the projector image, and say "Hey Gary, you've got a tweet."

2. It allowed for flexibility of someone else answering for the Incident Commander. The IC could have been standing nearby, unable to type out an answer, so someone else was able to do it for them. By using the @ reply feature, the IC can also see that someone has done this. It's not lost in the shuffle.

3. Using the @ symbol also delivered messages to the intended people, but publicly, so others can answer. The person who received a reply answer (@IDSH_PIO) was able to get the information they needed, but so did everyone else. Now, if someone needs to know where the PIO is, they have that information, instead of racing around again, trying to find out.

4. It creates a record of what happened, which will help write the After Action Report (AAR), plus it gives a written transcript of the conversation, if needed. Just copy and paste all the Tweets into an index as part of the AAR.

5. Each POD was able to share the number of people processed through POD with everyone. Best of all, they did it without sending an email. The information was immediately accessible, visible, and available to everyone. Emails tend to get buried and forgotten.

6. The ISDH PIO was able to pick up some useful information – the number of people through each POD – just by following the general timeline. He would not have found this out otherwise, because the EOC might not have had all the information at hand.

7. The Incident Commander was able to give the most important talking points to the PIO in a matter of seconds, not several minutes on the phone. This avoids the PIO never being able to reach the Incident Commander.

VII. Social Media Resources for Crisis Communicators

Blog posts, PDFs, and PowerPoint slide decks

What Can Swine Flu Teach Us About Crisis Comm Through Social Media
www.problogservice.com/swine-flu-teach-social-media/

Responding to Crisis Through Social Media (downloadable PDF)
www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&ct=res&cd=25&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.marketsentinel.com%2Ffiles%2FCrisisresponseusingsocialmedia.pdf&ei=QID6Sa31LInyMpnshMAE&usg=AFQjCNG2-h3F3UMMQQrbiQz8UYQMHdrhSw

CrisisBlogger (A blog about crisis communication)
crisisblogger.wordpress.com/2007/10/21/social-media-and-impact-on-crisis-communication/

Crisis Communication on the Social Web (PowerPoint slide deck)
www.slideshare.net/geoliv/crisis-communications-on-the-social-web-presentation

Crisis Communication on the Social Web
www.livingstonbuzz.com/2008/11/03/crisis-communications-for-the-social-web/

Advergirl - Crisis Communications and Social Media
leighhouse.typepad.com/advergirl/2008/04/crisis-communic.html

PR 2.0 - Reinventing Crisis Communications for Social Media
www.briansolis.com/2008/11/reinventing-crisis-communications-for.html

Conversationblog - Using Social Media for Crisis Communications
www.conversationblog.com/journal/2008/2/7/using-social-media-for-crisis-communications.html

DaveFleet.com - Social Media and Crisis Communications: Talk Is Cheap Presentation
davefleet.com/2007/11/social-media-and-crisis-communications/comment-page-1/

DaveFleet.com - Social Media Reading for Traditional Communicators
davefleet.com/2009/01/social-media-reading-for-traditional-communicators/

ActiveMetrics - Crisis Communications and Social Media
activemetrics.wordpress.com/2008/10/01/crisis-communications-and-social-media/

In Case of Emergency - The NEW Disaster Media
breakglass.wordpress.com/2007/10/22/the-new-disaster-media/

ReadWriteWeb - Social Media Used to Keep Flood Victims Informed
www.readwriteweb.com/archives/social_media_red_cross_floods.php

Photo Credits

p. 3 - Bendable toys (*Orange County Register*)
p. 4 - NBC5 News Control Room - Eric Olson (Flickr)
p. 8 - Haiti photo
p. 8 - U.S. Airways photo (@janiskrums)
p. 9 - Twitter logo
p. 10 - Google Analytics screenshot (Erik Deckers)
p. 11 - Picasa screenshot (Erik Deckers)
p. 13 - Bit.ly screenshot (Erik Deckers)
p. 14 - Posterous screenshot (Erik Deckers)
p. 15 - Blogger screenshot (Erik Deckers)