Spreading information (and misinformation) like wildfire

In the wake of the London Metropolitan Police Service report into the 2011 UK riots, **Anna Averkiou** looks at how social media is changing the way crises are managed

SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BEEN AROUND since 1997 when SixDegrees.com launched, allowing users to create profiles and list their friends. But the shocking speed and range at which it is now being embraced and can spread information was unthinkable. So it is not surprising that social media initially received a lot of blame for contributing to the August 2011 riots spreading from London to the rest of the UK.

"We struggled with social media during the riots – we didn't have a clue," admitted Superintendent Roger Gomm QPM, of the Metropolitan Police Service's Public Order and Operational Support Branch. Indeed, the Police *Strategic Review* into the disorders said: "The ability of gangs to co-ordinate widespread crime during the riots by using the Internet and other means of digital communication was a new phenomenon."

It continued: "However the MPS had not encountered an incident with such fast-moving coverage and its system to co-ordinate and prioritise the collection of relevant intelligence was tested to the limit. The MPS could not comprehensively monitor social media in real-time and was therefore not in a position to be moving ahead of events," the report concluded.

The issue now is not so much with social media *per se*, as the lack of understanding about how it works and can be used in crisis situations.

When big stories happen, they will break on Twitter – which had its 'CNN moment' when IT consultant Sohaib Athar, inadvertently tweeted about the US-led operation to kill Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad.

Users send text updates of up to 140 characters via SMS, email, instant messaging and other social media sites. By using a # symbol, conversations are created around themes and topics eg: #riots, #oilspill, #floods, enabling anyone with a Twitter account to add their own views and comments. 'Trending' is the term used to list the most

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popular conversations – so it is easy to see what people are most concerned about or interested in at any given time or location.

Different social media platforms can be linked automatically – so Twitter posts can also be seen simultaneously on any number of platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn – and photos and video can be attached via sites such as Flickr and YouTube. The more followers and friends an account holder has, the higher the number of people who can see the information and potentially pass it on to their followers and friends.

The downside is that anyone can say anything – so from a crisis management point of view, it is hard to keep control of what is being said. During the riots, one user retweeted a link to an image of the London Eye apparently on fire. It took almost half an hour before someone pointed out that as the structure was "made of iron" it was hard to imagine the Eye being flammable (it's actually made of steel). However, over the next three hours 700 people retweeted the picture – even though there was now another discussion

Steve Woods / Dreamstime.com

going on about Photoshop.

Nearly a thousand people retweeted a photo of "tigers roaming around Primrose Hill", an affluent area close to London Zoo. One Tweeter recognised it as a picture of a tiger that had escaped an Italian Zoo in 2008.

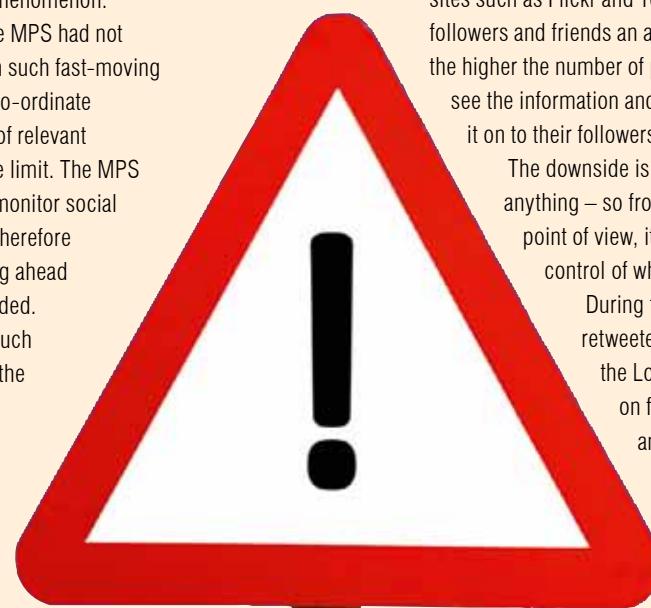A picture of tanks allegedly amassing in the City of London was actually from Egypt.

While the spontaneity and speed of social media are major disadvantages, they are also incredible advantages just waiting to be harnessed and used.

Frustrated and upset by what he saw on the news, artist Dan Thompson went online and, using the hash tag, #riotcleanup, appealed for volunteers with brooms, dustpans, bin bags and gloves. Overnight thousands retweeted his call, resulting in spontaneous and effective social action communities appearing the following morning to help clear up the mess.

Online communities

The ease in which data can be uploaded using mobile phones is now the key to successful crisis management and it is essential to factor them in to any future crisis strategy. The latest global figures from the International Telecommunication Union estimate that there are six billion mobile subscriptions – equivalent to 87 per cent of the world's population. Of these, 1.2 million are active mobile-broadband subscriptions. Even the much criticised Blackberry Messenger (BBM) – which young rioters used to mobilise themselves – can be set up in advance with the members of your crisis team and then used as an effective, private and cheap communication tool.

During the 2010 Russian Wildfires (*CRJ* 6:3), at least 40 people died and thousands were

left without homes or possessions. A state of emergency was declared, but the authorities had tremendous problems co-ordinating the information and providing immediate help to victims because of the huge geographical area affected and new fire fronts springing up. The Russian online community came to the rescue, organising itself to provide help via a website for volunteers. Using the crowdsourcing platform, Ushahidi.com ('testimony' in Swahili), people mapped the fires using information and reports sent in by the public via SMS, Twitter, email and the web. They facilitated connecting those needing help with those who could assist.

Ushahidi's Director of Crisis Mapping, Patrick Meier, explained: "Disaster-affected populations have become increasingly digital thanks to the widespread adoption of mobile technologies. As a result, affected populations are increasingly able to source, share and generate a vast amount of information, which is completely transforming disaster response."

The ease of use and speed in which a site can be set up is borne out by the use of Ushahidi in disaster relief operations and humanitarian crises throughout the world – including the earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, extreme weather conditions in the USA and China and human rights abuses in Kenya, the Middle East and North Africa.

"Having a real-time map is almost as good as having your own helicopter... They provide you with a bird's eye view of what's unfolding in real time," added Meier.

Dutch police and fire departments are currently testing Twitcident.com. Once an emergency is entered on the site, it searches for relevant tweets that are then presented in real time to the appropriate service.

Utility companies have already started using more personal and reactive ways of responding to emergencies such as power outages. Using Twitter alongside more traditional methods such as press releases and press conferences, they are able to explain what is happening, provide safety advice and show that not only are they in control and dealing with the situation, but that they care about the effect it is having on their customers.

When an estimated five million West Coast Americans were left without power last September, San Diego Gas & Electric was quick to react with a tweet: "We understand power is out, we are working on the cause and solution. We do not have a restoration time yet."

Using #outage, the company tweeted information constantly and responded to customers for the next 12 hours, providing safety advice: "The outage has affected street lights. Please drive safely and treat street

The infamous picture of the London Eye 'burning' during England's riots last year. Although rapidly established as being Photoshopped, hundreds of people retweeted the image

A notorious internet meme: The bottom image was altered to create the middle one in which none of the missiles have misfired. The image spread across cyberspace, with dramatic and often humorous additions

signals as four way stops," tips: "Keep your refrigerator and your freezer doors closed to help prevent food spoilage," information about their efforts to restore power: "We are seeing pockets of customers restored, like #NationalCity, #bonita, #escondido, #otay, #SanClemente," and reassurance: "We are trying to reach life-support customers via phone and in person visits says SDGE prez."

All this was backed up by a website, an online map showing affected areas, information relayed via local radio and TV stations and press conferences given by SDG&E senior executives.

It concluded: "In 12 hours we connected 100 per cent of our substations. VP of @SDGE says most widespread outage of territory in history."

As I write, flash flood warnings are appearing all over Twitter and Facebook from organisations such as the British Red Cross (see p44) ahead of forecasts of torrential rain in the south of England. A new Flood Alerts application from the Environment Agency in the UK allows Facebook users to receive updated messages every 15 minutes when a flood alert or warning is issued in their area.

YouTube is the second largest search engine after Google. During the ash cloud crisis, Qantas used YouTube to explain why it was choosing not to fly. A video featuring its Head of Operations and Chief Pilot describing the key factors and decision-making process attracted more than 13,000 views in the first week.

As with anything, the secret to using social media successfully in a crisis is to be prepared and to factor it in from when you first start planning any crisis strategy. One of the biggest mistakes I constantly come across is the use of interns and college leavers to "do social media" – on the premise that they are young and 'understand' it; and, more often than not, to cut costs. But seeing as this is fast becoming the main way in which to communicate with your stakeholders, this is a false and dangerous economy. If you take on board anything from this article, please invest in experience, maturity and staff training to ensure that not only are your crisis media relations managed properly, but that your reputation stays intact.

If you are not in a position to be seen to respond immediately and provide regular updates in a crisis, the press and public will have a field day – and there are a lot of 'creative' people ready to flood the Internet with misinformation and damaging comments about you and your organisation. In the worst cases, they could create widespread panic. Just Google 'BP oil spill funny' and see the number of spoof websites, videos, adverts and negative comments in the wake of BP's now legendary approach to the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill. Would you find them so amusing if they were about you or your organisation? **CRJ**

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