

STATEMENT

OF

SHAYNE ADAMSKI  
SENIOR MANAGER OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

BEFORE  
THE

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SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE AND  
COMMUNICATIONS  
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WASHINGTON, D.C.

**“EMERGENCY MGMT 2.0: HOW #SOCIALMEDIA & NEW TECH ARE  
TRANSFORMING PREPAREDNESS, RESPONSE & RECOVERY #DISASTERS  
#PART2 #GOVT/NGOs”**

Submitted  
By

Federal Emergency Management Agency  
500 C Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20472

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Brooks, Ranking Member Payne and Members of the Subcommittee: Good morning. I am Shayne Adamski, Senior Manager of Digital Engagement for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). On behalf of Administrator Fugate and Secretary Napolitano, thank you for the opportunity to discuss FEMA's use of social media.

I am pleased to be here today to discuss the role of social media in disasters and emergencies. Technology grows and changes rapidly, providing us with increased opportunities to educate and empower the public. Tools that did not exist even five years ago are now primary modes of communication for millions of Americans. Of course, tools such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter were not created for the purpose of preparing for, responding to, or recovering from emergencies and disasters. However, the potential for useful application of these tools to strengthen the effectiveness of the FEMA mission exists and should be explored.

FEMA's success in fulfilling its mission is highly dependent upon our ability to communicate with the individuals, families and communities we serve. For that reason, social media conversations are extremely valuable to the work we do, and we are fortunate to have partners with us here today who see the value of using these tools to increase public safety.

Today, I would like to discuss why social media is important to the work we do as well as how FEMA uses social media and strategic partnerships to fulfill our mission.

## **The Power and Promise of Social Media in Emergency Management**

FEMA's approach to emergency management recognizes that individuals, families and communities are our greatest assets and the keys to our success. In order to fulfill our mission, we must work together as one team – this notion is at the heart of our whole community approach to emergency management.

Social media is imperative to emergency management because the public uses these communication tools regularly. Rather than trying to convince the public to adjust to the way we at FEMA traditionally communicated, we have adapted to the way the public communicates, leveraging the tools they use on a daily basis. Millions of Americans use social media every day to check in on friends and family, learn about current events, and share their experiences. FEMA uses social media to be part of this ongoing dialogue and meet people where they are, using tools and platforms they are already familiar with.

FEMA also uses social media and other digital methods to communicate because as we have seen, information can lead to action. Our goal is for our safety-related information to have a real-world impact – to inspire actions that lead to more resilient families and communities. If

someone sees a preparedness or safety tip from FEMA, the goal is that it will inspire them to prepare or empower them to tell a friend how to be more prepared or where to find help.

Finally, social media and technology allow us to reach more people more quickly during disasters, when they need accurate, timely and, authoritative information that helps ensure the protection of their life or livelihood. With one click of the mouse, or one swipe on their smartphone's screen, a message is capable of being spread to thousands of people and have a tangible impact.

### **How FEMA Uses Social Media**

FEMA uses multiple social media platforms to reach the public and to provide them with useful information. While no individual social media tool is exhaustive or all-encompassing, each allows us to communicate with the populations we serve. I would like to discuss a few of the social media tools we use at FEMA, and how we use them.

We are very active on two of the most popular social networks in America – Facebook and Twitter – where we are able to reach the greatest number of active, engaged users. We have three Facebook pages and 34 Twitter accounts. Collectively, our Twitter accounts have 400,000 followers, while our Facebook pages have 143,000 fans. FEMA also manages a YouTube channel as well as discussions on an online collaboration site called IdeaScale.

These numbers also show our growth and demonstrate our increasing ability to communicate with Americans online. When I started in my position in June 2010, we had 25,000 followers on all of our social media accounts combined. Today, FEMA has well over 500,000 users on these sites.

FEMA uses social media in five primary ways.

First, we use social media to provide up-to-date information about how the whole community emergency management team, including FEMA, is helping communities and individuals prepare for, respond to and recover from and mitigate disasters.

At the onset of the recent Oklahoma tornadoes, one of the many messages that we tweeted was: “#Oklahoma: We're working closely with state emergency management & local officials. We stand ready to support as needed & requested.” Soon after, we followed up with the news that FEMA had deployed Urban Search & Rescue, Incident Management and Mobile Emergency Response Support teams to Oklahoma.

And just after Hurricane Sandy we posted photos of our FEMA Corps Community Relations (now called Disaster Survivor Assistance Teams) personnel going door-to-door in the impacted areas, helping survivors get help and apply for aid in New Jersey and New York.

We also leverage our social media accounts to help our federal, state, local, tribal, territorial, and private sector partners share key messages. For example, we shared many status updates from trusted sources before, during and after Hurricane Sandy, including from Governor Chris Christie, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and other governors and mayors throughout the affected region.

Following the Oklahoma tornadoes in May, we amplified key messages from the Oklahoma state government and the city of Moore. We regularly share updates from our partners at all levels because we recognize that successful emergency management requires a whole community approach and effort.

Second, we use social media to provide safety and preparedness tips. As the Subcommittee is aware, we are currently in the middle of the 2013 Atlantic hurricane season, so we recently posted tips regarding properly securing windows during a hurricane. Similar messages are posted regularly across all of our social media accounts to help ensure that Americans have actionable, specific ways to get themselves, their families, their business, and their communities better prepared for disasters.

These safety tips focus on more than just preparedness. We also share information about how people are able to stay safe during and after disasters with critical reminders to stay away from damaged areas and allow emergency crews and rescue workers to work.

Third, we use social media to inform the public of the most effective ways to help disaster survivors. Americans show tremendous generosity after disasters, so we provide tips on how that generosity could be most effective. For example, we encourage Americans to donate through trusted charities that know the specific needs of the impacted community.

Fourth, we tell disaster survivors where and how they are able to receive assistance – whether that be from FEMA or from another trusted source. To accomplish this, we leverage all of our social media accounts, including those managed in each of FEMA’s regional offices. Our regional offices fill an important niche, providing useful information to local users, such as locations of FEMA’s Disaster Recovery Centers or by highlighting local resources. We employed this tactic after Hurricane Sandy and during both the recent floods in Illinois and the tornadoes in Oklahoma.

Fifth, we tap into the potential of social media to gain valuable feedback. As I shared before, social media is at its essence a conversation and it is a conversation that we strive to be an active part of. Of course, in true conversation, both participants listen and respond in turn – social media is no different. This exchange is a critical component of being viewed as a responsive, authoritative source of information.

This two-way flow of information had an impact after Hurricane Sandy. In the days following the hurricane, FEMA launched “Rumor Control,” an initiative using all of our online platforms

to dispel inaccurate information being shared online. We listened and identified rumors circulating online, from logistics information to specific disaster assistance programs, and moved to quickly correct the misinformation. This was done by creating a Rumor Control page on [fema.gov](http://fema.gov) and [m.fema.gov](http://m.fema.gov) (FEMA's mobile website), as well as through answering many questions received through our Facebook and Twitter accounts. FEMA receives questions almost daily on Facebook and Twitter, so we dedicate resources to answering them, thus helping to fulfill FEMA's mission of supporting America's citizens.

To further facilitate feedback and interaction from the online community, FEMA also holds the equivalent of "virtual town halls" using Twitter chats. Twitter chats are real-time conversations using the platform. One recent example came after Hurricane Sandy. Federal Coordinating Officer for New York, Mike Byrne, participated in a Twitter chat and fielded many questions, such as "How do homeowners get the amounts they need to rebuild?" and "Has @Fema spread into affected communities, holding open houses and is it better coordinated w/other agencies than 1 mo ago?". These online "townhalls" allow FEMA to answer questions in an open, public forum and contribute to growing our online following, which is essential to educating a greater number of Americans.

As we use social and digital media, we follow record management and Paperwork Reduction Act rules. It is also important to note that FEMA writes content explicitly so that it does not trigger the stipulations of the Paperwork Reduction Act and archives all social media content/conversations for records management purposes.

### **Collaborating with Key Partners**

In addition to sharing key messages on our social networks from our partners, social media also allows FEMA to work with partners, such as the American Red Cross, to share information about the nature of online conversations after a disaster.

We also share what our private sector partners are doing during a disaster, such as posting information about Tide Loads of Hope locations, where survivors can wash their clothes and Therapy Dogs International, which provides specially-trained dogs to comfort survivors.

Additionally, we collaborate with our partners across the emergency management team on messaging and outreach for preparedness campaigns such as September's annual National Preparedness Month.

To fully collaborate with our partners, particularly those in the private sector, we also make some types of information available for their use. One example is our Disaster Recovery Center data feed that contains information about open Disaster Recovery Centers. Google regularly includes this data in their Crisis Maps, which shares helpful information in a familiar and accessible format.

We also regularly collaborate with our colleagues who work for platforms like Facebook, Google and Twitter to better understand how our messaging could be seen by more users, especially during and after disasters.

FEMA looks forward to making these non-profit and private sector relationships even stronger in the future.

### **Social Media: Part of FEMA's Larger Digital Presence**

FEMA's digital presence extends beyond social media. FEMA also communicates with Americans via the web and various mobile platforms. These channels complement each other and allow us to reach a larger audience.

FEMA runs several websites that serve as authoritative sources for information, including: [fema.gov](http://fema.gov), [ready.gov](http://ready.gov), and [disasterassistance.gov](http://disasterassistance.gov).

FEMA is also tapping into the importance that cell phones play in everyday life, specifically through our smartphone app, text message program and Wireless Emergency Alerts. In my experience, cell phones are often a lifeline after a disaster and many times are the only source of information in the hardest affected areas. As citizens continue to use smartphones more and more, those of us in emergency management should continually be looking for ways to share our message and make our services available through those devices.

In 2011, we also released our FEMA smartphone app, which provides information on how to: make a plan and build your emergency kit; stay safe and rebuild after a disaster; and lookup open disaster recovery centers and open shelters. We are very proud of the fact that the safety information in the FEMA app is accessible within the app even if the user does not have a cellular or Wi-Fi connection – making it a valuable tool during a disaster.

Text messaging is a form of communication that is particularly useful during and after a disaster when phone lines may be congested and voice calls often do not get through. Sending and receiving text messages requires less bandwidth and helps reduce the volume of phone calls in an area so that necessary communications are able to continue to be made.

After the May 20 tornadoes in Oklahoma, we posted a message to Facebook that reminded people to use text messaging to check in with friends/family in the impacted area, as well as the American Red Cross Safe and Well site. [The message](#) was seen by more than 230,000 people on Facebook.

In 2011, FEMA was the first federal agency to establish its own text message short code – meaning that anyone could text 43362 or 4FEMA to obtain valuable information. Texting this code allows people to search for open disaster recovery centers and shelters. During the height of Hurricane Sandy, our text message program received more than 10,000 requests in one day from people searching for shelter locations within a specific ZIP code. Citizens could also sign up to

receive regular preparedness tips regarding the hazards that are most common in their area, such as earthquakes, wildfires, hurricanes, or tornadoes.

Local and state public safety officials can send Wireless Emergency Alerts directly to citizen's cell phones, utilizing FEMA's Integrated Public Alert & Warning System. These geographically targeted messages are sent from emergency managers, the National Weather Service, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to warn citizens about severe weather, AMBER Alerts and other threats to safety. During national emergencies, the President can also communicate with citizens using Wireless Emergency Alerts.

### **Personal Preparedness Meets Digital**

At FEMA, we often share how Americans could use technology to be "digitally prepared," and I would also like to take this opportunity to share some of those items today.

To ensure they are prepared, we encourage people to take these steps:

- Store useful phone numbers in their phone, including numbers for local police, fire departments, and their utility company;
- Create a group of emergency contacts in their cell phone;
- Educate themselves on what social media tools are being used by their state, local, tribal and territorial emergency management offices, so that they are able to quickly access them in the event of an emergency;
- Have an extra battery for their phone (or a solar charger) in their emergency kit;
- Update their social media channels in the aftermath of a disaster to let their friends and family know they are safe by simply texting "I'm OK"; and
- Know how to use text messaging to check in with friends and family after a disaster.

Many social media sites also allow users to update their status via text message, and I would encourage the public to become familiar with how to do so.

### **Moving forward**

Moving forward, FEMA will continue to engage in online conversations that lead to a more prepared, better informed public.

We are constantly refining our social media approach, listening to feedback from our stakeholders and keeping our ear to the ground on the ever-evolving world of social media and the digital space. We also learn from the conversations we have on these platforms and from continued collaboration with our partners. We do all of this to achieve our core mission of supporting America's citizens.

I look forward to addressing any questions the Subcommittee may have.