

Changing Role of the Individual

Long-term Trends and Drivers and Their Implications for Emergency Management

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The way in which individuals interact with society is changing rapidly. This has potentially significant implications for emergency management. These changes will present both real opportunities and serious challenges. Key trends include:

- Americans are increasingly relating to one another in different ways, particularly through online forums;
- American society is becoming more mobile; and
- “Amateurs” are increasingly becoming trusted sources of information at the expense of “experts;”
- Public trust in institutions in the United States is decreasing and shifting to social networks.

In April, 2010, several members from the Strategic Foresight Initiative (SFI) community gathered to develop a list of issues, factors and trends (“drivers”) that could drive change in emergency management throughout the next seven years. This document contains preliminary research conducted on behalf of the Strategic Foresight Initiative on the Changing Role of the Individual driver. This research is intended to serve as a discussion point for further discussions, and does not represent a forecast by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This paper is a starting point for conversations around a highly complex topic, and SFI encourages feedback about this paper from the emergency management community.

SFI is a collaborative effort of the emergency management community that is being facilitated by FEMA. SFI was launched so the emergency management community can seek to understand how the world is changing, and how those changes may affect the future of emergency management. It will do so by encouraging members of the community to think about how the world may look over the next several years, and what steps the community should begin taking to thrive in that world. Participants in SFI include emergency managers at the Federal, state, local, and tribal levels, subject matter experts on relevant topics, and other stakeholders.

Anybody who would like more information about SFI should contact the team at FEMA-OPPA-SFI@fema.gov.

Key Trends and Drivers

Americans are relating to one another in different ways, particularly through online forums. Numerous observers have noted that Americans are beginning to relate and communicate to one another in different ways. In the year 2000, Robert Putnam observed that Americans were not engaging with their communities as they traditionally had—for example, community organizations and bowling leagues were suffering from dwindling membership.¹ During this time period, a new form of social interaction has emerged—online social interaction via computers and other technologies. A vast majority of all age groups go online to use email, and a growing number of people are using the internet to benefit from social networking sites.² Some research suggests that, of all the adults who are active in some kind of voluntary group or organization, internet users are more likely to participate in groups than non-internet users.³

Some have speculated that the adoption of advanced technology as a social tool will lead people to relate to one another more as individuals rather than as members of households, communities, kinship groups, workgroups, and organizations. This has two implications—that people are less likely to have purely geographically-bound social networks, and that people are more likely to relate closely to the members of their network. Proximity continues to matter, but is losing importance, as people maintain more long-distance ties with friends, kin, and workmates than ever before through the use of technology. Technology thus enables individuals to be more selective in their interactions. This can lead to networks containing higher proportions of people with shared interests or other bonds and lower “proportions of people who are forced to interact with each other because they are juxtaposed in the same neighborhood, kinship group, organization, or workplace.”⁴

This trend implies that emergency managers may want to consider new ways to engage with community organizations. Current engagement strategies are mostly based on “industrial era patterns of manufacturing and residence” where communities are defined as “geographical areas that contain a homogeneous population and a narrow range of social institutions.” Emergency managers traditionally contact neighborhood associations, businesses, schools, faith-based community groups, trade groups, fraternal organizations, ethnic centers, and other organizations during resilience-building activities providing information in a “top-down” manner.⁵ With the growth of the internet and social media, people have created virtual communities upon which they rely for information exchange and validation, and as platforms for mobilizing collective action

Whether used for serious or entertaining purposes, these virtual communities are powerful information sharing and organizing environments, which can impact major world events. During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, the effective use of social media by pro-democracy demonstrators to organize themselves led to the Egyptian government shutting down internet access.⁶ In the response to the devastation caused by the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, people contributed information to disaster maps created using the web-based Ushahidi mapping program.⁷ Since 2008, a group calling itself the Urban Playground Movement has used social media and the internet to organize a worldwide flashmob⁸ to participate in International Pillow Fight Day.⁹ It is critical that emergency managers understand how these non-traditional social

networks function and how to use these forums to both provide information and engage in a dialogue with the people they serve.

American society is becoming more mobile. As transportation systems and communications technology have advanced, Americans have become less tied to physical spaces and more mobile. The vast majority of Americans have cellular telephones, and many are beginning to use the “cloud” for computer services that are available through multiple devices.^{10, 11} Telecommuting has also become much more common. Nearly half of small businesses allowed their employees to telecommute in 2010.¹² The Federal government is also working to expand its adoption of telework.¹³ Another factor in this increase in mobility has been an increasing tendency for Americans to make life changes more frequently. For example, young workers are more likely than older workers to anticipate switching careers or employers in their lifetime, and nearly six in ten employed Millennials (Americans born after 1981) said they have already switched careers at least once.¹⁴

This trend has multiple implications for emergency managers. As Americans become more mobile, they may become less familiar with the areas in which they live. People may not have lived in areas long enough to be familiar with the terrain, and others may have relied on technologies vulnerable to disruption during a disaster, such as GPS, to navigate. Indeed, the Royal Academy of Engineering recommended that emergency managers in the United Kingdom review their own dependence on GPS and related technologies.¹⁵ Emergency managers will also have to prepare for changes in the workforce. Future employees may be less likely to serve at one agency for a significant portion of their career, or even spend their entire career as an emergency manager.

Power and influence of “amateurs” may continue to increase. In 2006, Edelman, a company that annually surveys from whom and where the public trusts information, noted that amateurs were significantly rising in influence. The company noted that “a person like yourself or your peer,” “friends and family,” and “colleagues” were all rising in influence relative to credentialed experts such as CEOs and legislators.¹⁶ Amateurs have since dropped somewhat in influence, but are still more influential than they were in 2003.¹⁷ Amateurs have also become increasingly empowered by factors such as globalization and technology such as the internet.¹⁸ Some have suggested that the implication of these trends will be that traditionally empowered “experts” with institutional backing and authority may have less influence in the future.¹⁹ According to Beth Simone Noveck, government was designed “with the idea that government officials and public managers have more information and expertise than citizens.”²⁰

This shift of influence away from credentialed elites challenges how governments communicate with citizens. Research in public opinion has found that political elites have a significant role in shaping public opinion, leading government leaders to target political elites with messages.²¹ This trend could suggest that this model will be less useful in the future, or that the definition of “political elites” may need to be expanded to include amateurs with large audiences. Some emergency managers have expressed concern that this will mean that the quality of public communications will degrade, as influence shifts to people who have robust networks and post a high quantity of information.²² This growing influence of amateurs also will have implications

for government decision making and communications cycles. Amateurs are generally able to provide information more quickly than does government, although sometimes this information is unreliable.²³ Governments must meet the challenge of understanding this new information sharing environment and create communications strategies that will promote public confidence in the information they provide.

Public trust in institutions is generally decreasing and shifting to social networks. People in the United States are expressing decreased trust in major institutions, including the government, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and the media.²⁴ According to the Pew Research Center, trust in the Federal government, Congress, and local governments is at near-historic lows.²⁵ Generally, members of the Millennial generation (currently 18-29 years of age) are less skeptical of government than older generations.²⁶

The rise in the influence of amateurs noted above is a reflection of the shift in the public's trust from institutions to social networks. A recent survey on the role of social networks in elections, noted that voters turned to their own social networks to check information provided on the candidates' official websites/social media feeds preferring to interact with people they felt they could trust rather than official sources.²⁷ Referencing the international outrage caused by the Egyptian government's shut down of internet access during the 2011 revolution, a Harvard University media researcher noted that "It feels very strange not to be able to check a broadcast report for 'authentic' voices from the ground."²⁸

This decrease in public trust in institutions could be problematic for emergency managers. Many emergency managers are affiliated with major institutions, particularly government, and key partners like the Red Cross and corporations that are considered major institutions as well. Research suggests that distrust in political institutions can lead to the rejection of initiatives that are perceived as imposing a burden on individuals.²⁹ This could in turn lead to difficulties in implementing actions such as individual resilience-building activities, hazard mitigation, and evacuation orders.

Correlation to Other Drivers

- **Demographic Shifts:** Although there are increasing ways for individuals to relate to one another, adoption of the technologies that facilitate these shifts is unevenly distributed across demographics. The elderly, minorities, people with comparatively lower income or education attainment, and rural Americans are less likely to use the internet.³⁰ In addition, usage patterns vary across races. African Americans and Latinos are much more likely to use their phones for internet access, which can offer a very different experience than access via a computer.³¹
- **Evolving Terrorist Threat:** Both internal and external factors can serve as catalysts to radicalize individuals. These factors include economic, social, political and personal grievances that make individuals receptive to new worldviews.³² The next step is to "associate themselves with like-minded individuals and adopt this [new] ideology as their own...."³³ According to a report from the Homeland Security Institute, "the Internet plays a

vital role in creating social bonds that are necessary for radicalization and recruitment, as well as providing a venue for perpetuating radicalization among groups of recruits.”³⁴ This includes individuals who “self-radicalize” by seeking out terrorist organizations. Experts have raised concerns about the possibility that terrorist attacks perpetrated by radicalized Americans may be more successful and lethal due to terrorist organizations’ ability to connect to radicalized Americans remotely and provide resources and suggested tactics.³⁵

- **Technological Innovation and Dependency:** Technology has played a significant role in enabling many of the trends affecting the role of the individual. Thus, future trends in technological advances and adoption may significantly affect the role of the individual as well. Future technologies will likely enable new individual capabilities and create the potential for new individual vulnerabilities.
- **Universal Access to and Use of Information:** Dramatic advances in technology have made information available on any topic, at anytime, anywhere. The time an average American spends consuming information has risen over 60 percent in the last thirty years, from 7.4 hours per day in 1980 to 11.8 hours per day in 2008.³⁶ The amount of information available has grown exponentially over the same time period.³⁷ Based on this growth in consumption and availability, there have been suggestions that the American public is expecting access to even greater quantities of information, particularly online.^{38 39} Citizens may expect access not only to summaries of information online, but also “direct access to the data and information they need.”⁴⁰ In addition to greater access to information, they will also expect to be engaged for their input; the traditional “top down” hierarchy of information gathering and release will be considered unacceptable. The Federal government has signaled that it will provide “an unprecedented level of openness in government,” including the creation of Data.gov to provide raw government data to the public.⁴¹ However, the implementation of transparency measures has been uneven across different levels of government and across different agencies.⁴² It is possible that as social media and other Web 2.0 technologies become more popular, the public will expect not only increased access to information online, but also “to interact with government agencies online and have agencies listen to their voice.”⁴³

Conclusions & Questions

- **Community organizations will likely change in the future, in how they coordinate with members and what they are organized to do.** What community organizations might emergency managers partner with in the future? How might emergency managers engage and collaborate with them and their members?
- **Individuals are becoming more empowered in society.** How will emergency managers foster and support this empowerment to engage the public as a partner in achieving effective emergency management outcomes?
- **“Amateurs” will likely wield more power in the future.** What challenges might be associated with communicating with relatively more empowered stakeholders with relatively

less subject matter expertise? What opportunities might be presented by these new stakeholders?

- **Americans are becoming more mobile.** How might communities change if residents move around more often? How might more frequent telecommuting and other less centralized work patterns affect emergency management assumptions?
- **Public trust in institutions has decreased.** Might this trend persist? How might emergency managers respond to citizens having less faith in the institutions emergency managers represent? How do emergency managers effectively communicate and engage with the public by employing information sharing forums that the public trusts?

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⁸ Flashmob: a group of people summoned (as by e-mail or text message) to a designated location at a specified time to perform an indicated action before dispersing. Available at: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/flashmob>.

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