



“SITE SEEING” IN VIRTUAL SOCIAL SPACE: USES OF POSTS IN TIMES OF DISASTER

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ABSTRACT – The recurring global natural and environmental disasters that the entire world is experiencing have alarmed and prompted various sectors to take this matter seriously. Various sectors have revisited the traditional media channels of mass communication wherein content was generated from a central source and disseminated through different channels for people’s use and consumption. In recent years, social media and video sharing sites and other Web 2.0 platforms paved the way for more collaboration and interaction by allowing people to contribute and interact instead of just passively viewing news and content. This paper examined how the virtual social space, specifically Facebook and Twitter, were used during a week-long flooding in the various parts of the Philippines caused by Southwest Monsoon. An online archival analysis was done to understand its uses in times of disaster. Results revealed the following themes: for news and situation updates; for community support and assistance; for policy clarifications and environmental awareness; for uploading of photos and videos; venue for Filipino humor and character; and for product and services promotion. What used to be a medium for socialization has become a venue for people to share stories; experiences, news update, and provide essential information to those who are affected by natural disasters. The social networking sites, such as Twitter and Facebook, now serve as sites for people to participate on issues about natural disasters.

Keywords: social media, disaster, southwest monsoon

INTRODUCTION

The world has experienced in recent years a series of major natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in United States of America, earthquakes in Haiti and Japan, tsunamis in Indonesia and Japan, and the extremely cold winter in Europe, and it is expected that their frequency will continue to increase in the coming years (Velev and Zlateva, 2012, p.1). The Philippines has also its shares of natural disasters that have affected large portion of its population. In the past, communication during disasters made use of the traditional media channels of mass communication wherein content was generated from a central source and disseminated through various media for people’s use and consumption. In the early stage of

digital revolution, people used the Internet to simply read and watch the content. The advent of Web 2.0 such as social media and video sharing sites paved the way for more collaboration and interaction as it allows people to contribute and interact instead of just passively viewing news and content. The gradual but quick evolution in the Internet "has transformed the intimacy of word-of-mouth behavior into a broadcast-like ability to communicate with the masses, whether a group of friends or hundreds and thousands of online-but-connected strangers at computer keyboards" (Blackshaw & Nazzaro 2004, p. 3). Social media allows people to participate and create conversations instead of merely receiving information. According to Velev and Zlateva (2012, p.1), during natural disasters there is an increase in communication among people since they try to contact their family and friends in the areas where disasters happen, and get information about how to obtain food, find shelter and transportation. They further added that social media has played an essential role in information dissemination about natural disasters by allowing people to share information and ask for help.

Social media is defined as the set of online word of mouth forums which includes blogs, discussion boards, forums or social networks (Mangold and Faulds, 2009, p. 358). Cohen (2011) identified the following characteristics of social media: encompasses wide variety of content formats; interactions can cross one or more platforms through social sharing, email and feeds; participants can engage in various levels such as creating, commenting or simply lurking; facilitates increased speed and wider information dissemination; allows one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communications; communication can be in real time or asynchronously over time; device indifferent which means it can happen in a computer, tablets and smart phones; and extends engagement by creating real-time online events, extending online interactions offline, or augmenting live events online.

Keeping the communication line open during crisis and disasters is very essential to all affected people. In recent years, the rise in the users of social media has attracted agencies involve in natural crisis and disaster management to maximize its use. The surge of social media users and supporters has prompted crisis and disaster communication practitioners to re-examine conventional communication methods and study how these can be applied to the online world (Howel and Taylor, 2012). As Holmes (2011) put it, with social media, everyone can become watchdogs, citizen journalists, photojournalists and be constantly vigilant of what's happening in the world around them and share these online. Aside from providing news about natural disasters, social media are also becoming essential in the recovery efforts after crises, especially when infrastructure need to be rebuilt and stress management is critical (Velev and Zlateva, 2012).

OBJECTIVES

This study examined how the virtual social space was used during disaster.

Specifically, it aimed to:

1. Understand how selected accounts in Facebook and Twitter were utilized during a week-long Southwest Moonson in the Philippines;
2. Identify the media links that were frequently used.

FRAMEWORK

This paper views virtual social space from the participatory lens. According to Liew (2014), 'participation' is probably the one word that highlights the particular quality of social media considering that it is fundamentally designed as a participative medium. Participants in virtual social space are able to

comment, argue and debate, share information, and upload digital content in varying formats. Jenkins (2006) noted that with the emergence of Web 2.0, there is a paradigm shift in the way media content are produced and distributed. He also observed that these new technologies empowered audiences to participate within the culture. Langlois (2011) claimed that it is inherent to all online participatory media platforms that accessible and instantaneous communication is tantamount to greater possibilities for participation.

This study examined the use of virtual social space guided by the following principles of participatory communication: dialogue, voice, liberating pedagogy, and action-reflection-action (Tufté and Mefalopulos 2009). These principles framed how the uses of social media were viewed. Tufté and Mefalopulos (2009) also noted that participatory communication is also about “visibility and voice in the mediated public sphere.”

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on an online archive analysis of selected social media sites to understand how the social media is used in times of disaster. “Site-seeing” is an Internet lingo that means visiting a site to see what is going on. The following social media sites were visited and analyzed for this study during the week-long heavy rain in the Philippines that caused week-long flood in various areas during the first week of August 2012:

- Weather watch facebook account of the Philippine Information Agency (PIA), the government agency that provides news and information about the Philippines. 'Weather Watch' page provides real-time updates and welcomes citizen reports on weather disturbances, including natural disasters, affecting the Philippine area of responsibility. A total of 8,852 likes registered as of August 12. Of these likes, 1,950 likes were just within August 2012. Postings from August 6 to August 11, 2012 were analyzed for this study.
- Twitter account of ABS-CBN News @ABSCBNNews. ABSCBNNews ranks number one as the Twitter user with most followers in the Philippines according to WeFollow, a user-powered Twitter directory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Use of Facebook page of PIA and Twitter account of the @ABSCBNNews

This study showed that social media such as Facebook and Twitter has evolved from a venue of socialization to a venue for interaction and communication during disaster. Aside from the main objectives of providing real-time updates and welcoming citizen reports on weather disturbances and natural disasters, the Facebook page and Twitter account have also become venues for other practical purposes. As a participatory media platform, the use of Facebook and Twitter during natural disaster showed more citizen participation and allowed greater possibilities for collaborations and interactions. The following uses emerged in the analysis:

- *For News and Situation Updates*

True to its intent, the Facebook page and Twitter account were mainly used for posting announcements, news, and updates regarding the events related to weather disturbances. For the entire week of August 6 to 12, 2012, the Facebook page of weatherph was flooded with postings about the Southwest Moonsoon or Habagat which caused flooding in many areas of the Philippines. The post about this started on August 6, 2012 when the weatherph announced and shared a link posted by Interaksyon, the online news portal of one of the Philippine major TV stations (TV 5), that “*although there is no*

the rains from the Southwest Moonsoon will drench Luzon and Visayas." This post was shared five times, and liked by four people.

In a study by Howell and Taylor (2012), they found out that in times of disasters, individuals turned to social media sites and selected Facebook, next to watching television even before accessing online news services.

The announcements were sourced from various radio and TV stations, newspapers, various government agencies such as PAGASA or Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration, DOST or Department of Science and Technology, NDRRMC or National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, DepEd or Department of Education, DOH or Department of Health, DPWH or Department of Public Works and Highway, DSWD or Department of Social Work and Development, DTI or Department of Trade and Industry, DoE or Department of Energy, NAPOCOR or National Power Corporation, TESDA or Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, MMDA or Metro Manila Development Authority, PNR or Philippine National Railways, PNP or Philippine National Police, and AFP or Armed Forces of the Philippines, and also from volunteer organizations like RED CROSS.

Themes of the announcements were on: flood status, traffic updates, availability of public transportation, cancellation of classes, forecast of rain fall, dam levels, weather updates, water supply updates, electricity updates, prizes of goods, evacuation centers, extent of destructions, relief efforts by the government, rescue efforts, state of calamity, health news, death tolls and rehabilitation programs. There were also updates on areas that need repair and construction of important thoroughfares and bridges. Updates on release of calamity funds by government agencies were also posted. There were also announcements which were specific to regions and locally affected areas.

Although the main use of Facebook and Twitter in this particular study was for posting announcements, news, and updates, it should be noted that the sources of the news came from various sites. This highlights the intertextuality of social media wherein it fundamentally involves the act of sharing texts in the form of status, updates, photos, links, or videos (West & Trester, 2013). This intertextual practice surfaces the participatory nature of Facebook.

- ***For Community Support and Assistance***

The Facebook page and Twitter account were also venues for users to post questions and ask for assistance. Themes of the questions were about: cancellation of classes; cancellation of work; which areas are flooded; when will relief efforts reach their place; where can they get medicines; and how can they get food, water, and clothes.

It was worth noting that there were some posts asking assistance for specific people: "*Please get some help for the ___ family in _____. According to my friend her family is stuck in their small bodega on the 2nd floor. Here's the address: #_____ (the way to the village from _____, before _____). Your quickest response will be most appreciated. Thank you and God bless!*"

Users also used the account to call on volunteers and appeal for assistance and donations for the victims of the flood. There was a group of Filipinos in Kuwait who launched a drive for flood victims. According to Lindsay (2011), social media have been used by individuals and communities to communicate to their friends, family and others the unsafe areas or situations as well as raise funds for disaster relief.

The page was also used by private as well as customer service sector to announce their efforts to help consumers such as free use of mall parking; freeze hike of certain goods and commodities i.e. oil, canned goods, LPG, etc.; rescheduling of appointment for passport applicants.

Howell and Taylor (2012) noted that during disaster events what is apparent is the “outpouring of support within and outside communities” and “the overwhelming driver was a sense of community”.

This theme highlights one of the most essential characteristics of social media as a participative medium and platform. It empowers communities to participate in social processes by making their voices heard through their posts.

- ***For Policy Clarifications and Environmental Awareness***

The Facebook page and Twitter also became a venue for clarifying policies and rules pertaining to disaster management. This is a sample quote from one of the mayors of Metro Manila: *“Only the Office of the President can order stoppage of work. We only suspended classes, NOT work.”*

There were also posts and tweets from some government agencies on the procedures and steps on how rescue operations work. There was a specific post educating people about the project NOAH by DOST and about the rainfall warning signals. The ongoing disaster event became an opportunity for government agencies to disseminate information about their existing policies, procedures and programs which the public may be able to use not just during that particular disaster but for future events.

The Facebook page and Twitter account also became opportunities for various sectors to remind and educate people about issues on climate change, garbage segregation and proper disposal, illegal logging, and other environmental issues. There were calls from environmental advocates (both public and private sectors) to strictly implement environmental laws and measures to prevent cutting of trees in the forests and watershed areas, flooding, landslide, earthquake and other calamities. There were also calls and reminders to local government units (LGUs) to prepare comprehensive Disaster and Climate Risk Reduction Program and Recovery Rehabilitation Plan. It was also an opportunity to ask for a review of the academic calendar of DepEd considering the heavy rains during school months.

This theme surfaces the action performed by the various organizations and sectors as they respond to the disaster. By posting clarifications on policies and processes as well as disseminating messages and materials, these entities are making their voices visible in the mediated public sphere.

- ***For Uploading of Photos and Videos***

The posts and tweets were also used by various sectors to share photos and videos of flooded areas. The photos and videos were shared not just by reporters but even ordinary citizens. These posts have been reposted and shared by users.

The videos posted in Youtube news Philippines during the height of the rain brought by Southwest Moonsoon were mostly videos showing the status of the flooded areas in Metro Manila and nearby affected provinces. The top news in the Philippines Youtube, following the week-long heavy rain, all focused on the flooding and weather updates.

There was one photo of a newly-wed couple amidst the rain and flood that was shared and posted in the weather page. The photo generated lots of comments and posts from the users. The photo was a stark contrast to the usual photos uploaded showing the negative effects of the rain and flood. As.

the photo is juxtaposed with the other photos of floods and damaged properties, this can be interpreted as showing the resilient nature of Filipinos who persevere despite the challenges in life.

The videos have also been viewed a number of times showing that people now really turn to the web even for news and updates on current weather situation. Most of the videos posted bore logos of major TV and radio stations, as well as newspaper organizations. This only further shows the blurring of boundaries when it comes to news and reporting.

Ordinary citizens also posted videos and footages of the flooding in their areas and communities. According to an article in the *technology.inquirer.net*, citizen reports comprise 39 percent of videos in the news on YouTube. About 50 percent bore the logo of a news organization but some footages seemed to be original videos by ordinary citizens rather than journalists. This highlights the participatory nature of Facebook as it allows ordinary citizens to be able to share news thus allowing them to have active roles in collecting and disseminating crucial news and information.

- ***Venue for Filipino Humor and Character***

Filipinos are known for their humor and cracking jokes even in times of disasters and unfortunate events. This can be because of the happy nature of the Filipinos. In a 2015 survey by GALLUP, Filipinos have been reported to be the 5th happiest people in the world. Thus, it is not surprising to see jokes posted by people amidst the calamity. People used Facebook and Twitter to share well-meaning messages such as quotes, prayers, warnings and words of caution.

Humor has been known to be a coping mechanism in dealing with stress and unfortunate incidents. Abel (2002) noted in her study that both men and women with a high sense of humor were more likely to use positive coping strategies such as reappraisal of a stressful situation by positively reinterpreting its meaning.

One unique tweet which was not found in the Facebook post was a tweet on the cancellation of the University Athletic Association of the Philippines (UAAP) games. Posts and tweets found during this week-long rain and flood were mainly about things that are of human interest and that are important to them. This shows that sports such as basketball play an important role in the lives of Filipinos.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper investigated how the virtual social space, specifically Facebook and Twitter, were used to construct issues and how these sites were used in times of disaster. Results of the study showed that Facebook and Twitter postings during the week-long heavy rains in the Philippines, that submerged a large part of Metro Manila and nearby provinces, focused mainly on providing news, announcements and updates about the crisis. These sites now serve as sites for breaking-news about natural disasters. They are among the first ones to deliver the news since they are regularly visited by millions of users, thus helping communicate the news to a large mass of people (Nagar, Seth, Joshi, 2012). Even YouTube has become a major platform for sharing news based on the recent study done by the Pew Research Center (2012). According to the report, news-related events were the most searched items on YouTube in five months of a 15-month period in 2011 and early 2012. One of the study's key findings is that the most popular news videos were about natural disasters or political turmoil. The report also revealed that the Japanese earthquake and tsunami was number 1 in the list, and accounted for five percent of the 260 videos during that period.

What used to be a medium for socialization has become a venue for people to share stories; experiences, news update, and provide essential information to those who are affected by natural disasters. According to Howel and Taylor (2012), social networking sites are now a powerful medium to assist crisis communication practitioners in disaster and crisis awareness as well as develop better relations with key stakeholders through sharing of information. Through its interactive nature, social media allows regular citizens to share their own stories, photos and videos of natural disasters.

The findings of this study suggest that virtual social space can be used for various purposes and can be useful not just for individuals but for government agencies and organizations as well. This type of study can be pursued especially in other types of disasters. Findings can be shared to concerned organizations and sectors for consideration of social media in their information dissemination and in reaching out to a wider and more diverse audience.

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