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Global picture darkened considerably on many fronts over 2016. This year is predicted to be the hottest on record, setting a new high for the third year running. The WMO said in November that human-induced global warming had contributed to all aspects of extreme weather events studied. These high temperatures help to fuel climate change and the ensuing deadly consequences in these regions are experiencing a spat of lethal earthquakes struck Italy this year (p14). Japan and New Zealand were similarly afflicted, thankfullly with fewer fatalities. Also released in November, the Global Terrorism Index (GTI) noted a ten per cent decrease in terrorist acts in 2015, but it was still the highest year on record – what will the figures be for 2016? The GTI said there were 5,556 fewer deaths in Iraq and Nigeria, attributed to Boko Haram and ISIL becoming weaker in these countries. But construction of one part often leads to expansion into another: terrorism is leaching into other areas. On p43 we explore the growing use of children in the role of suicide bombers. Although this may indicate a certain weakening of these terrorist groups, it is nevertheless a distressing and perturbing trend. And of course major conflicts claim far more lives than terrorism. The feature starting on p50 explores the consequences for humanitarian attempt to operate in such hostile arenas. This segues into our feature looking at attacks on healthcare (p63).

We had hoped that by the time the journal was published a more positive picture would be emerging. But CRU went to press in the week that Austria lost its last functioning hospital after a relentless wave of airstrikes. More positively, this issue also covers IT innovations developed to assist IDPs and refugees (p30); new medical equipment and research that can help in crisis areas (p74 and p78); and how robotics and drones are building capacity and fostering resilience (p84). The talk covering the compelling role of robots, explains Andrew Schroeder.
Technology and social media mean that the demand of an incident might have less immediate information about the situation than people on the ground.

Martha Verheugen / shutterstock

Hurricane Sandy, 2012: A Sandy gamenoid 30 million tweets after the storm struck the USA (2012). This was the first time American citizens used social media on such a massive scale and the first time the Red Cross had set up a digital information processing centre. This was a watershed – the first emergence of a group of digital volunteers who mobilized on the ground, especially when official claims of a desire to see citizens directly engaged with responding to emergencies – social media can mean that those in command have less information than those on the ground. The flash flood of information is the first wave; the second shockwave is when people in the midst of a large-scale event mobilize, network and take the initiative. This is the world of high-speed connectivity and a poorly prepared official will be stunned and feel threatened by possible false information, dangerous initiatives and loss of control. Sadly, some still view this as competition to their duties, a threat to his or her mission and organisation. If this is the case, social media appears to be an unwelcome intrusion, a source of impossible problems and not a key resource that can be harnessed.

In such instances, social media will be fought or ignored. Again, the words of the House of Representatives in the Hurricane Katrina report will resonate: “Why do we continually appear to be a disaster behind?”

The only possible way for officials in charge is to enter the world of social media for emergency management (SMMEM), adjust rapidly and make the best of this new deal. The bad news is that the move is far from easy: operational responders and authorities have neither the culture, the time, the tools and the skills to set up a SMMEM team within their organisation.

The good news is that there is a growing awareness of the urgency to abandon resistance to change and to tackle these unprecedented realities.

The best news of all is that some advanced groups of people have networked over the last few years to offer support to official circles in bringing these gaps, especially with regard to harvesting and analysing information and data from social media, and linking with citizens on the ground. In France and in the French-speaking world, the role of VOST (Volunteers for Virtual Operation Support) has been upgraded to International Volunteers for Virtual Operation Support (VISOV).

This network’s mission is to monitor social media during major events, detect people in distress and relay this information to the brigades and emergency services. VISOV also aims to build a synthetic of operational information for the authorities. This includes: Photos or videos to capture a major and fuzzy event; geolocation-based testimonies to locate specific developments or people; detecting rumours and denying them; and detecting emerging initiatives. VISOV federates volunteers and organisations in-house mobilisations during crises. Each volunteer brings his or her own skills and experience. This human factor forms the strength of the association and makes the wealth of exchanges possible.

The association helps officials to develop in-house SMMEM skills by sharing experience and feedback, and collaborates more widely in the development of SMMEM in the French-speaking world and beyond (VISOV is a member of the European VOST and of the world level VOST Group).

Reliability and robustness

In the last three years, SMEM and VISOV have developed further. An increasing number of volunteers have joined the association and an increasing number of national and regional authorities have signed formal agreements with VISOV. Every single event triggers new reinforcements for association membership and enhances its official recognition.

In parallel, VISOV is increasing its reliability. Procedures and tools are becoming ever more robust – especially monitoring tools, reporting formats and channels. For the immediate future, work is ongoing to increase the overall capability of the network, which means meeting some stimulating challenges: Growth: A smooth transition from an organisation of 100 towards a mega-group of several thousand members within the French speaking world; Dynamic equilibriums: Formulating tools and processes, while keeping the spirit of a citizen association (being professionals but remaining volunteers).

In conclusion, SMEM is a major stake for authorities: if they do not embrace it now – even if it might seem difficult and counterintuitive – they will lose the battle of crises.

The challenge is severe, since this is an incredibly fast developing arena that is going to fundamentally transform crisis navigation. Those who do not engage with SMEM are at risk of defeat in every single emerging crisis.

But the experience gained at this stage is very rewarding: progress is possible, and can be extremely rapid.

Authors
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Example of two tools set up by VISOV for authorities that mobilise the association: a deployment file and a collaborative way