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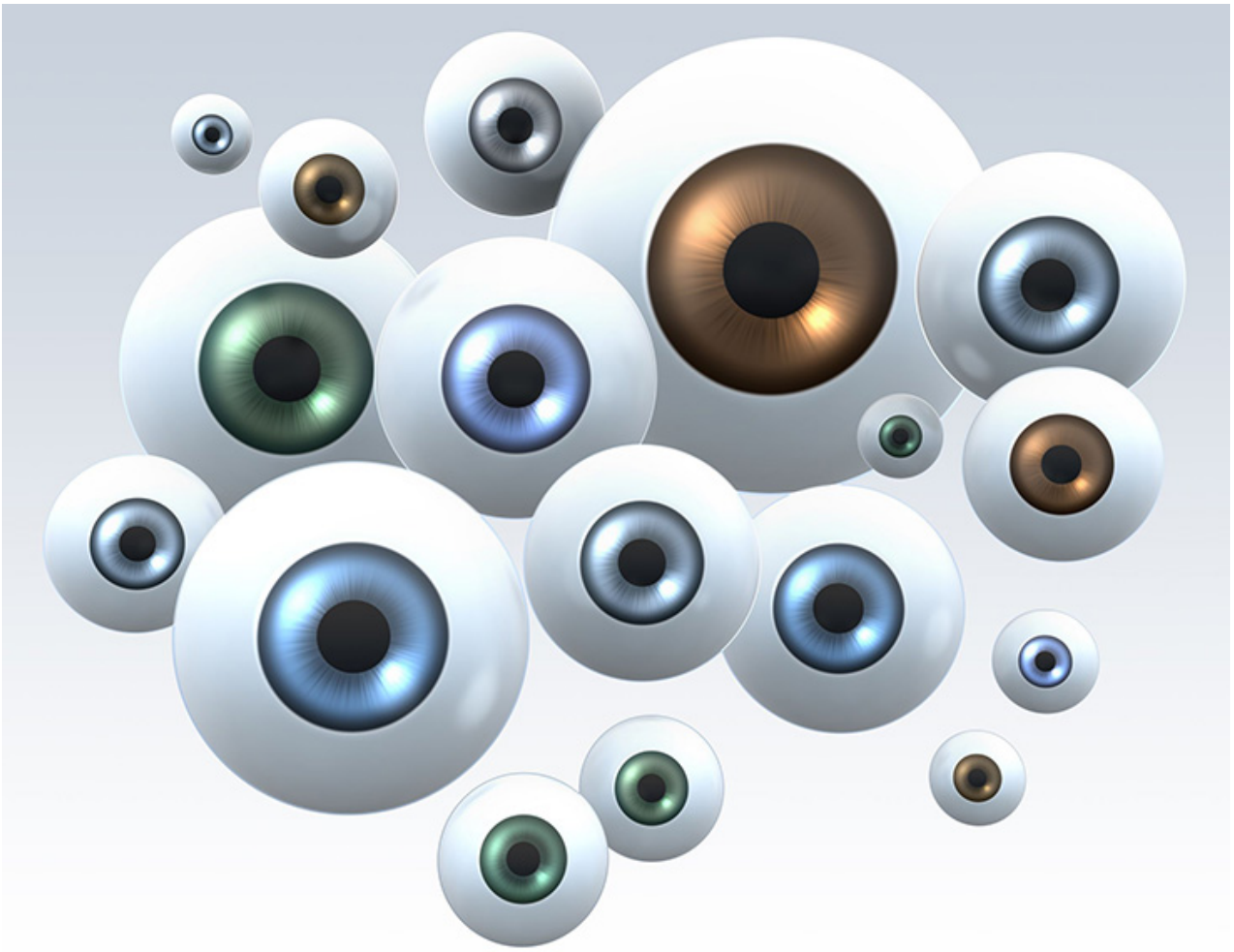
Social networks in a crisis: Shifting landscapes

Posted on **16th May 2017** at **16:18pm**

Patrick Lagadec reflects on the use of social media in a crisis, following the European Emergency Number Association's (EENA's) annual conference in Budapest earlier this April.



Social media works in different, highly dynamic rhythms during a crisis, with hundreds of eyewitnesses to the event engaging and becoming involved in near real-time (photo: Omnimages/rf123)

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Six-hundred-and-fifty participants from 55 countries took part in the event, including VISOV (international volunteer organisation that supports operations in the virtual world), VOST-Europe (Virtual Operations Support Group) and Team D5, which provides support in crisis communications and is co-ordinated by the National Crisis Centre in Belgium. Reputatio Lab, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Waze, AirBnb and Deveryware also took part, indicating the surge of new tools, emerging new cultures and new organisations bursting onto the scene; all of which are helping to address the urgent gaps that hitherto would not previously have been adjusted.

This gathering reveals a trend of moving away from the universal anchorages that have been held for decades – the idea of automatic 'panic' in a crisis and that the prevailing behaviour in an emergency is antisocial. It indicates a breaking away from the historical, centralised, pyramidal command structure into new, emerging dynamics.

Hurricane Sandy marked the break; the new model is now bottom-up, embracing collaborative efforts and harnessing the abundant new tools that are breaking previous habits and codes, redistributing knowledge and power, and calling for new learning.

For example, during an earthquake, eyewitness accounts from those on the scene can be collated on the Internet virtually in real time (using LastQuake, for example), allowing faster and more detailed mapping of a disaster that seismographs alone can provide. Further examples include Person Finder, Safety Check and self-organised social media initiatives, such as #PorteOuverte, which saw people throw their homes open to those with nowhere to stay after the terrorist attacks in Paris. These phenomena work on different, highly dynamic rhythms.

The world of emergency was built on the establishment of well-defined missions that were devolved to a few key players, ad hoc plans and procedures, exercises aimed at technical development, coordination, and more recently, communication. The legacy is cumbersome: an assumption that the population cannot do anything relevant and that members of the public are even likely to complicate or get in the way of actions by responding authorities. As far as information goes, the prevailing wisdom has first and foremost taken the form of reassurance, telling the public that 'everything is under control' in an emergency.

Now via social networks, citizens are playing a decisive role in terms of alerting, information, rescue and in providing immediate support (as well as accommodation). The events of September 11, 2001, showed the way, with the unplanned and unofficial evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from southern Manhattan via an armada of ferries and other vessels, mirrored by a mobilisation of buses and coaches in New Jersey (*James Kendra & Tricia Wachtendorf: American Dunkirk – The Waterborne Evacuation of Manhattan on 9/11, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2016*). This does not mean that the usual official actors in an emergency are relieved of their responsibilities, but their actions must be rethought in a far more complex, dynamic and rapidly mutating landscape.

Social networks open up new spaces for unplanned actions, rapid

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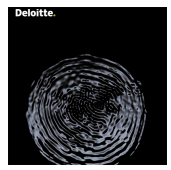

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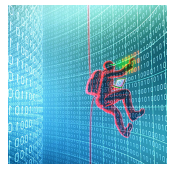

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interaction and unlikely combinations. The most advanced organisations have already recognised these new dimensions and are navigating them creatively, as the SDIS-30 Fire Service in Nimes is doing in France, or the communications team of the Belgian National Crisis Center, which received an award at the EENA conference.

Our current visions, organisations and tools were designed for relatively simple, linear, stable worlds. Today's world is unstable, subject to brutal crystallisations and effervescent recombinations. Social networks, which combine instantaneity, collaboration, plasticity and power, are in tune with the wilder world that conventional frames and codes are finding increasingly difficult to understand and deal with. Listening to the many contributions presented in Budapest leads to a better understanding of these rapidly emerging realities, which require new paradigms and new tools. Many of the assets of the previous paradigm should, of course, be preserved and developed, but if they remain stuck in the current mindset and do not evolve, they will have little chance of meeting today's challenges, let alone those of tomorrow.

The biggest difficulty is that our systems are exposed to the loss of their founding landmarks, and to the irruption of social media networks and the abundance of actors who use them and bring them to life. And it is here that current management practices or emergency administrations are late to the party, or have even broken down. The essential way forward is to work together.

Yet leaders are often extremely reluctant to prepare to be surprised, to explore new alliances, often stating that the best of these new initiatives have already been well integrated. If they do not want to be overtaken by the power of social networks, they must learn about them and engage with them, not try to fight or destroy them. Social networks, we must know them and talk to them. At the conference in Budapest Benoît Ramacker, communication pilot at the Belgian National Crisis Centre, encapsulated this idea by saying that everyone needs to be able to play their part in the world where nobody has the monopoly of solutions.

Of course, social networks are not without risks, but we can only limit these risks if we can play with finesse and inspiration in these new symphonies. It is urgent to respond intelligently to this transformative switch that we are experiencing.

Crisis Response Journal Advisory Panel Member, Dr Patrick Lagadec, took part in a session examining social media at EENA 2017, as did Nicolas Vanderbiest, who wrote on Countering false online rumours in CRJ 12:2. Click here for the conference material. Read about how EENA and Waze are joining forces in an emergency response pilot project in the next issue of the CRJ (12:3, published May 2017).

EENA's conference material is shared here

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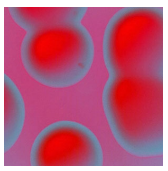

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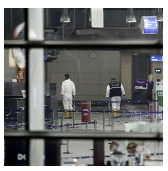

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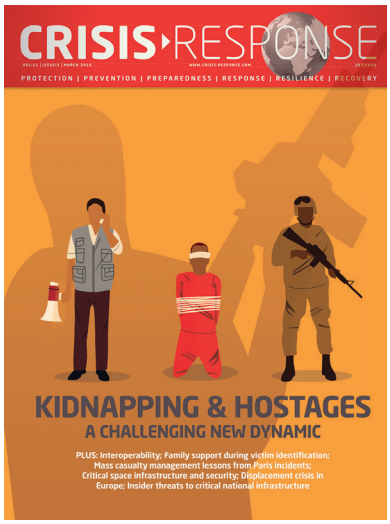

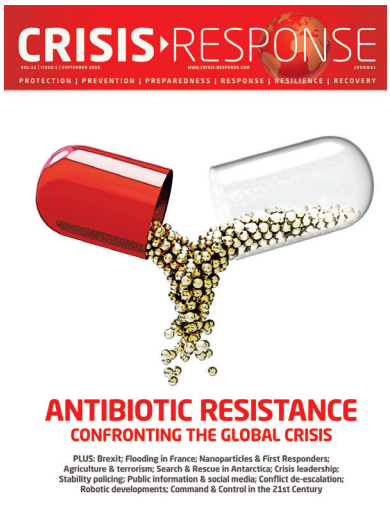

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