

A Study on the use of Social Media as a Tool of Citizen Journalism with Special Reference to the Updates on Kerala Flood Relief

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2395.3810.201819>

Abstract

Social networking is a unique platform for content sharing used by people all over the world irrespective of vast differences in language, culture and societal norms. The connectivity, flexibility and ease of access have lead to the utilization of these social networks as a tool of citizen journalism. Now-a-days, people exhibit their social responsibility by informing or reporting about the problems in the society through these social networks that reaches the masses which in turn makes press and media, government officials and authorities to look into the issue.

Kerala, famously called as “The God’s own Country” is facing its worst time ever with the pouring rainfall, flooding rivers, landslides and people are losing their lives, getting displaced and are being accommodated in several camps in the state. In this situation, people in and around Kerala is using social media to organise, collect, and distribute the relief funds and materials required in different locations. It is noted that immediate requirements are informed to people through social media and it is being fulfilled at the earliest.

The purpose of this study is to explore the utilization of social networks as the journalistic tool by the citizens and attempt to sooth the hardships faced by the people.

Keywords: Social media, Citizen journalism, Social responsibility, Kerala floods, Flood relief

Introduction

Social media is a technological boom in the field of communication as its multi-utility nature proves it to be successful in all possible aspects. Starting from individual communication to disaster management, role of social media in the societal upgradation has made it the predominant tool of communication. It has revolutionized the communication patterns among people in the world. Its features like connecting with people anywhere in the world at higher rate of speed and its highly complicated networking styles in reaching out made it unique and strong when compared to the other media platforms. Another important aspect with social media is to form a group or forum to plan, discuss, gather and act. This prospect is seen in several occasions like protest or even during

natural calamities.

Social Media and Citizen Journalism

Citizen journalism is the most trending aspect where the people act as a journalist in informing the world about any happening around them. Journalists cannot be there in all places and that is where citizen journalists play their responsible role of reporting the news. Online users tends to follow the citizen journalists more often than the traditional source because its quick ways in reaching public and the different forms of content like text, photographs and live videos adds up to the credibility of the news shared. Not only about getting the messages, dissemination of information is also very easy and fast, and hence news reaches people in large scale without any sort of barriers.

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How to cite this article: Sathya P. A Study on the use of Social Media as a Tool of Citizen Journalism with Special Reference to the Updates on Kerala Flood Relief. *J Adv Res Jour Mass Comm* 2018; 5(4): 50-53.

One important reason for the huge success of the citizen journalism is the gratification of both the ends. The person who posts the information is gratified by the number of people who views it and acknowledges his effort. In the other end, the receiver of the post, shares their view, discuss about further details and get clarified with the information. The response to the post may be positive or negative, but the matter of importance is the acknowledgement and the discussion. The feedback is immediate unless other media. In this way both the sender and receiver are getting gratified for their efforts.

Kerala Flood 2018

The most recent natural calamity in Kerala due to the unusual extreme monsoon rainfall started on evening of August 8, 2018 has lead to the flood and landslides in various parts of the state. Out of forty two dams, thirty five dams was about to over flow and hence it was opened to excess drain out excess water that flooded the low lying areas of the nearby locality. The Kerala government announced that one sixth of the state population is directly affected by the floods. This heavy flood washed away men and material in the most affected regions resulting in 445 people dead, 15 reported missing and millions of people still stranded in relief camps. Government officials stated that most of the roads and bridges are damaged. Chief Minister of the state mentioned that measures are taken to clean up flood hit houses for the people to return home and electricity lines are to be reinstalled. In social media hastags - #keralarelief, #keralafloods and lots more were flooded for creating awareness and immediate action from the people.

Social Media for Disaster Management

Taking social media as tool of communication during a natural calamity or any disaster is not a new phenomena in the 21st century. Whenever a helpless situation arises, people rely on the social media platforms like facebook, twitter, whatsapp, etc., to seek help from other people and also inform the world much faster about their serious issues. To locate people during any disaster is also a very important facility rendered by the social media – Google maps. During Chennai floods it was noticed that people utilized Facebook to inform their family and friends that they are safe by marking themselves in the option provided.

Important and famous news that happened during Chennai flood was airlifting a pregnant woman for her delivery. It was informed by a girl through social media which brought the attention of government officials and necessary action was taken. Later in social media, updates were given about the new born baby boy and the mother. Thus Social Media not only informs but also follows up the event and gives the conclusion too.

Government and Social Media

By understanding the seriousness of the situation and relevance of immediate action, Government also took social media in hands which was well supported and handled better by the citizen journalists. The Chief Minister of the State was active in twitter and he introduced the website link for the stranded people to inform control room about the issues in their locality, and also was a call for the registration of volunteering and donating funds for relief measures (www.keralarescue.in).

Kerala Chief Minister also tweeted a specific web address for donations alone for people around the world for their contribution (<https://donation.cmdrf.kerala.gov.in/>). It was a successful fund raiser move by the government.

By joining hands with citizen journalists and active volunteers, government officials are able to locate the people and help them with aids and requirements.

Organizers and Social Media

Socially responsible citizens extended their hands to help Keralites in this natural calamity not just by spreading news but also in organising a team to work for the needy. There are a lot of people involved in organising the relief measures.

One among them was Johann Binny Kuruvilla, a travel blogger, worked 14 hour shifts in District Emergency Operations Center in Ernakulam, Kochi. His main focus was to get the distress call from people so that he can contact the rescue team and guide them. He shared the information along with his contact number in five active groups in Whatsapp who were working on relief measures. Soon he starting getting calls from people with emergency needs and ails. On an average of 300 call per day was received and the information was transferred to an Excel sheet so that the information is not missed out and follow ups can be done. This information was communicated to police, army and other rescue team for further actions.

Kuruvilla also contacted INSPIRE, a forum of mechanical engineering students at a government-run engineering college at Barton Hill in Kerala. They had made nearly 300 power banks for mobile charging as mobile phone are the only fastest means of communication. When he spoke to the authorities, they agreed to air drop the power banks in the needed places.

World Vision India, an NGO used its website, to collect donations for relief kits as they are aware of the requirements of the people in relief camps.

Jayendra Prachabakesan, founder of Bhoomika trust stepped down to spread their helpline number in social

media for the medical aid rendered for the pregnant women, dialysis patients and elderly.

NGO based on Bangalore, 'Drive without Borders' run by Wassem Memon, effectively worked in Fund raising for relief measures. He said that they raise funds through social media and it gave wide publicity and impressive response. They ventured in collecting relief funds and in kind as well.

Actor Siddharth came with a donation challenge in social media (#KeralaDonationChallenge) and insisted people to donate generously and post the payment slip online to motivate others to do the same. This was another strategy adopted to raise the funds.

Social Media in Kerala Flood Relief

The corporate sector showcased their social responsibility by including certain factor in their sites and apps for Kerala relief which was widely publicized and utilized by people.

Amazon's introduction of 'Relief kit', Paytm's 'Donate for Kerala' option, Zomato's simple and bulk food orders for places in Kerala, Telecom operators like Idea, Airtel, Vodafone, BSNL and more gave free data services and gave options like loans where calls can be made without balance, later it can be paid.

Qkopy, based on Kozhikode, is a social networking free app released in the month of July. It was playing a great role in getting flood relief information to people using this app. When Kozhikode City Traffic Police phone number, was saved in the mobile phone, it accesses the mobile contacts and provides instant updates shared by the police, with coloured warnings.

Role of Citizens in Flood Relief

Though numerous initiatives are taken by government, military forces, organizers, and volunteers, it is the role of citizens (netizens) to spread the message to each and every one who has access to social networks. There are certain important factors carried out by the common man.

Dissemination of Information

Whenever new information was received regarding the flood relief, the people started to spread it in their group, share it in their wall or update their status. The immediacy and intensity of the requirements made lot of people to contribute as money or kind. The emergency contact numbers, medical aid, food supplies, rescue operations and even about airlifting messages was spread invariably by common people.

Spread of Situational Awareness

Not only text messages, photographs of the spot and the

videos spread the seriousness of the flood in specific areas. It was acting as a great source of information for people to understand the situation and guided to people to travel safe. Information regarding medical aid relevance, made many medicine practitioners to move to the relief camps for serving people. Instructions given to people to safeguard themselves from the poisonous insects and animals, etc., were a need of the hour. In some cases, increasing water levels in certain places were shared that helped people to safeguard their important documents and move to the safe places at the earliest.

Service Access Assistance

Organisers and volunteers spread the message about the access point and availability of camps in several locations to stay safe. These messages were sent virally so that it reaches the people in need. Regarding the availability of certain medicines and things of personal hygiene and other necessities are shared through social networks that lead to the proper distribution of goods in the camps.

There were people with relief materials stranded in the middle of the way without knowing where to hand it over. In such cases, it is the common man's updates that helped people to reach the access points.

Coordinate Actions to Reduce Risks

To avoid the risks, people ventured in communicating with the organizers and then spread the messages. There were updates on the requirement of food materials in specified camp and once it is achieved, there was feedback message delivered so that the same messages distracts and disturbs the flow of communication in a chaotic situation. These co-ordinating activities lead to the proper and reliable information spread and wastage of goods can be minimized.

Connectivity with Family and Friends

Being the most primary function of social media, it helped in connecting with family and friends to find a safe place and if in danger, any common man was able to report to the rescuers. While the rescue operation, to locate people struck, rescuing team asked the stranded to show their presence which was widely spread. Some people, who were not able to contact their family or friends, reported the rescue team. The information is spread to various camps to locate the missing ones.

Medical Aid and Services

The medical aid has always been an issue of top priority in any disaster. In camps especially, lot of medicinal aid was in need. Doctors in the camp sends the list of medicine needed with a signature which was considered to be the proof of real requirement and as a part of other relief

materials even medicines were sent to the camps.

Challenges Faced

There were lot of challenges faced in disseminating information as the late posts and updates are life-threatening ones. One major challenge faced was the fake news. People being so curious, starts forwarding anything and everything they get in the social media. Previous incidents' photographs and contents shared was a challenge. Some fake audios about the intensity of the disaster was exaggerated and doubts about the relief funds made people furious and stopped it all.

Comments on the root cause of the disaster were seriously discussed and accusations made. One group brought in religious traits like Women were allowed to the Sabarimala temple and that was the reason for the severe disaster. Another aspect was the political perspective, where the ruling party was targeted on the poor infrastructure lead to the disaster.

These were real challenges in moulding people back to the same service minded whole and continue the efficient co-ordinating and co-operative flood relief activities.

Conclusion

Technology has always been a boon and bane for human. But realising the situation and acting for the welfare of several lives is making this rescue and relief mission in a proper channelized manner with humanitarian thoughts which is deteriorating. Unified thought of goodness for safeguarding the lives in danger has brought people together in social media and work without expecting any sort of advantages or benefits in future. Social media had made people to feel very much empowered and socially responsible and hence active citizen journalism prevails in extending the helping hands during the disaster management.

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Date of Submission: 2018-09-08

Date of Acceptance: 2018-10-08