

**Written Statement of
Craig Fugate**

**Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency**

**Understanding the Power of Social
Media as a Communication Tool in the
Aftermath of Disasters**



FEMA

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Governmental Affairs**

**Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and
Intergovernmental Affairs**

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I. Introduction

Good morning Chairman Pryor and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Craig Fugate, and I am the Administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It is an honor to appear before you today on behalf of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security.

I am particularly pleased to be here today to discuss the role of social media in disasters and emergencies. Technology grows and changes rapidly. Tools that did not exist even five years ago are now primary modes of communication for millions of individuals. Of course, tools like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and others were not created for the purpose of preparing for, responding to, or recovering from emergencies and disasters. However, our success in fulfilling our mission at FEMA is highly dependent upon our ability to communicate with the individuals, families and communities we serve. For that reason, social media is extremely valuable to the work we do, and we are fortunate to have partners in the social media community with us here today who see the value of using these tools to increase public safety.

In my testimony today, I would like to discuss why social media is important to the work we do, what social media tools FEMA uses in order to fulfill our mission, and what the future might hold for the nexus between social media and emergency management. We at FEMA greatly appreciate your interest in this important subject.

II. The Importance of Social Media in Emergency Management

FEMA's "Whole Community" approach to emergency management recognizes that individuals, families and communities are our greatest assets and the keys to our success. In order to fulfill our mission, we must recognize that the public is an important participant in the emergency management community and that we must work together as one team. The notion of treating the public as a resource rather than a liability is at the heart of our emergency management framework.

Communication in and around a disaster is a critical, life-saving part of FEMA's mission. Social media provides the tools needed to minimize the communication gap and participate effectively in an active, ongoing dialogue. Social media is an important part of the "Whole Community" approach because it helps to facilitate the vital two-way communication between emergency management agencies and the public, and it allows us to quickly and specifically share information with state and local governments as well as the public.

However, it is just as important that these parties be able to share information with us. I often say that individuals, families and communities are our nation's 'first' first responders. The sooner we are able to ascertain the on-the-ground reality of a situation, the better we will be able to coordinate our response effort in support of our citizens and first responders. Through the use of social media, we can disseminate important information to individuals and communities, while also receiving essential real-time updates from those with first-hand awareness.

Most importantly, social media is imperative to emergency management because the public uses these communication tools regularly. Rather than trying to convince the public to adjust to the way we at FEMA communicate, we must adapt to the way the public communicates by leveraging the tools that people use on a daily basis. We must use social media tools to more fully engage the public as a critical partner in our efforts.

III. FEMA's Social Media Tools

FEMA uses multiple social media technologies to reach the public where they already go for information and provide valuable disaster and preparedness information. Social media platforms are valuable tools in our toolbox. While no individual tool is exhaustive or all-encompassing, each allows us to communicate with the populations we serve – before, during and after a disaster occurs. I would like to discuss a few of the social media tools we use at FEMA, and how we use them.

Official FEMA Channels on Third Party Sites

FEMA utilizes the resources of several non-governmental social media channels – such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter – as tools to communicate with the public. On FEMA's Facebook page, our more than 33,000 followers can receive updates on current situations and get preparedness tips through text, photos and videos. We also post information in Spanish.

On FEMA's YouTube page, users can watch videos detailing FEMA's response and recovery efforts, along with clips on topics such as how to prepare a disaster kit, what to do and where to go in an emergency, and how to apply for disaster assistance. The same videos are available on www.fema.gov.

FEMA's Twitter account offers brief updates to those looking for disaster preparedness or situational updates, including tweets in Spanish. FEMA also uses sixteen different Twitter accounts, including:

- A main FEMA account (@fema);
- My account, which I update regularly (@CraigatFEMA);
- The Ready Campaign account, designed to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to emergencies (@ReadydotGov);
- Citizen Corps, which helps coordinate volunteer activities that will make our communities safer, stronger, and better prepared to respond to any emergency situation (@citizen_corps);
- U.S. Fire Administration, which provides national leadership to foster a solid foundation for our fire and emergency services stakeholders in prevention, preparedness, and response (@usfire);
- The Louisiana Recovery Office, servicing Louisiana communities recovering from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (@femaLRO);

- Each FEMA regional office also posts on its own Twitter account, providing localized information on FEMA activities.

Twitter users can also follow topics of conversation that are of interest to them by following a “hashtag,” which is the name given to a common topic of conversation on Twitter. The Social Media in Emergency Management hashtag (#smem), while not created by FEMA, allows all members of the emergency management community to connect and talk, including emergency managers at the federal, state and local levels, technology volunteers, private sector entities and interested individuals. I am an active participant in the #smem conversation.

In order to facilitate further discussion, FEMA created the #imprepared and #kidsfiresafety hashtags, and in partnership with the American Red Cross, created the #howihelp hashtag. The #imprepared hashtag is used to encourage individuals and families to get prepared; the #kidsfiresafety hashtag is used to encourage parents to practice fire safety tips; and the #howihelp hashtag is used to encourage people to talk about how they help their neighbors and communities.

While YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have different capabilities and audiences, we use each of these tools as a way to facilitate two-way dialogue with the communities we serve.

Finally, last year, FEMA signed an agreement with Google Books to make FEMA publications available in a free, online format. Many FEMA publications are also be available through Google Books to e-readers, allowing the public to read FEMA publications in a portable format. We continue to look for new ways to use technology and social media to eliminate barriers to communication between FEMA and the public.

www.Challenge.gov

One of the ways we treat the public as an emergency management resource is through www.challenge.gov, the federal government’s platform for soliciting public input for creative solutions to government challenges. Between October 2010 and January 29, 2011, we accepted ideas for innovative and effective ways communities can prepare for a disaster before it strikes. We posted over 150 submissions from the public, and will promote the winning idea on the FEMA website in the coming weeks. Individuals and state and local governments can also view the submissions, providing one more mechanism for sharing ideas and best practices across the emergency management community.

FEMA’s Presence on the Internet

The FEMA homepage is frequently updated to provide the most relevant and up-to-date information to the public, prominently displaying preparedness information, links for disaster assistance, and updates on any ongoing situations.

In December 2010, FEMA also created a blog (www.blog.fema.gov), which provides information before, during and after a disaster strikes, and highlights the best practices, innovative ideas and insights that are being used across the emergency management community.

Ready is FEMA's personal preparedness campaign. Through its website, www.ready.gov, *Ready* is designed to educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to all emergencies, including natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks. The goal of the campaign is to get the public involved and ultimately to increase the level of basic preparedness across the nation.

FEMA's Mobile Website

In early 2010, FEMA launched its first-ever mobile website, which allows the public to view our easy to load web pages directly on their smartphones. The mobile site features information on what to do before, during and after a disaster, along with the ability to apply for federal disaster assistance directly from your phone. As we witnessed during the response to the Georgia and Tennessee floods in 2009 and 2010, disaster survivors often have little with them but their phones. As a result, providing the ability to register for assistance from smartphones enables us to immediately mobilize the appropriate assistance to support our citizens' needs during disasters.

IV. What's Next for Social Media in Disasters

While we have greatly improved our ability to communicate with the communities we serve by tapping into new technology and social media, we cannot stop there. Over the past two years, I have met with representatives from Apple, Craigslist, Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Twitter to continue the discussion on how we can harness the ever-changing capabilities of the digital world to better serve the public. While we have come a long way, we must continue to change and evolve the way we do business. We can do this in several ways.

Plan for Mobile

Cell phones are data centers, capable of quickly accessing and storing a large amount of information. Cell phones are continually gaining new capabilities, providing internet access, the latest weather, and access to our favorite social networking sites. For these reasons, cell phones are a lifeline during and after an emergency.

One of the major lessons we learned from the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti was that even if the physical infrastructure of an area is completely destroyed, the cellular infrastructure may be able to bounce back quickly, allowing emergency managers to relay important disaster-related information and enabling the public to request help from local first responders.

The fact that individuals are likely to have their cell phones on them in a disaster environment is highly relevant to how we must plan for disasters. FEMA's mobile site is an important step in the right direction, and I encourage my state and local counterparts to create mobile versions of their websites that are easy to navigate from smartphones, allowing the public to receive localized information during a disaster. In particular, we learned that text messaging was a key communication stream during Haiti. Survivors were even sending information on their locations via text – this proved helpful for everything from search and rescue to commodities distribution centers.

State and Local Participation in Social Media

We also continue to encourage state and local governments to engage with the public via social networking sites. Many states and localities are already taking action, and we are happy to support those efforts. For example, in the aftermath of the 2009 flooding in Tennessee, we worked with the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) and set up a joint Facebook page that we used as a resource to provide the public with the latest information about ongoing disaster response and recovery efforts in Tennessee. Now that the main recovery phase has concluded, TEMA uses the Facebook page as its own means to share preparedness and disaster-related information.

Receiving Valuable Input from the Public

We value two-way communication not only because it allows us to send important disaster-related information to the people who need it, but also because it allows us to incorporate critical updates from the individuals who experience the on-the-ground reality of a disaster. The exigent nature of emergency management makes time a critical resource. The sooner we are able to comprehend the full scope of the disaster, the better able we are to support our citizens and first responders. For that reason, we must seek out and incorporate information provided by the public.

This means that we must incorporate relevant information from all sources – including government at all levels, volunteer groups, the private sector, and also the public – in order to produce what we call a common operating picture. We must integrate public input and move away from a government-centric approach to emergency management. I have challenged my governmental and private sector partners to “free the data” by making non-sensitive disaster-related information like evacuation routes and shelter locations available and accessible to the public, so we can share the best information we have for decision-making in disasters. FEMA also looks at how we can view this information geospatially by plotting it onto a map, in order to improve our situational awareness during and after a catastrophic event.

A New Kind of Personal Preparedness

I have often said that a commitment to personal preparedness among the individuals, families and communities we serve is one of the most important keys to our success. Traditionally, that has meant doing things like having an emergency kit and a plan to reunite with one’s family, and that remains important. However, cell phones and social media have created new ways in which individuals can prepare themselves for disasters. A family or personal communication plan for disasters might include the following:

- Store useful phone numbers in your phone, including local police, fire departments and your utility company;
- Create a group for your emergency contacts on your cell phone;
- Know what social media tools are available to you at the state and local level, so that you can quickly access them in the event of an emergency;

- Have an extra battery for your phone (or a solar charger) in your emergency kit;
- In the aftermath of a disaster, update your social media channels to let your friends and family know you are safe by simply saying “I’m OK.” This helps reduce the volume of phone calls in an area so that necessary communications can continue to be made.

Personal and family preparedness is extremely important regardless of the disaster. However, as technology grows and changes, so will the ways in which individuals and families must prepare for disasters.

V. Conclusion

At the heart of all of our preparedness, response and recovery efforts is our strong belief that as members of a community, we bear the responsibility for ensuring the well-being of those around us when a situation demands collective action. Similarly, being able to rely on one another for help in a crisis makes our communities closer and stronger. It is that interdependence that makes two-way communication in a disaster so important.

My pledge to the individuals and communities we serve is that rather than asking them to change the way they communicate to fit our system, we will continue to change the way we do business to fit the way they communicate. In doing so, we will not only reach the largest possible audience to share important information, but we will help facilitate a two-way communication, engaging the individuals, families and communities as a critical part of our emergency management team.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Subcommittee may have.