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Opportunities and Risks of Social Media in Disaster Management

- A Swiss Perspective

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With the increasing use of social media applications, disaster and crisis management are confronted with a challenging role: They have to both facilitate the spread of accurate information and leverage social media to reach the public through various channels, while also addressing the issues that arise when false or contradictory information emerges. Also in the context of media monitoring, social media play an ambiguous role. On the one hand, they can significantly improve authorities' situational awareness during crisis. On the other hand, coping with large quantities and varying quality of data coming from social media requires considerable organizational investments.

The paper aims to describe major opportunities and risks of social media use in disaster management, with a particular focus on the Swiss context. We begin by reviewing different elements of crisis and risk communication in which social media can be employed. Building on experiences in crisis communication practice from a variety of countries, we outline the major opportunities and risks of social media that might be encountered at different stages of the crisis communication process. We also discuss recent efforts by Swiss disaster management authorities to utilize social media and meet the challenges of the information age. We find that disaster management authorities in many countries are already using the new technologies to increase public awareness and preparedness for disasters, to alert the public, optimize situational disaster awareness, and speed up recovery processes thereafter. In general, social media increases the range and speed of official crisis and risk communication. However, employing social media as a new communication channel requires a redevelopment of existing communication strategies, in order to avoid the dissemination of premature or inaccurate information. A redesigned strategy should also address the new expectations among citizens in respect to the channels' completeness, reliability and validity.