

» Social Networks and Cyclonic Season Challenges for the new risk management in the Dominican Republic

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Today we can state that social networks are already part of our way of life, of our behavior, of the way we communicate. They have gradually and cogently modified our habits and customs. We must face the reality of knowing how to use these new communication tools properly and, thus, guaranteeing its survival. Today, undoubtedly, social networks are part of the way of life of millions of people on the planet. It is no secret to anyone that they are already influencing the social behavior. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Instagram, among others, are slowly and firmly having an impact on behavior habits of millions of people every day.

It is a fact that our everyday life involves, almost necessarily, incorporating the new information and communication technologies because, just as a neuron cannot do by itself what the brain does, it can neither cope outside a social environment that now also exists in terms of virtuality, as stated by scientists at the University of California, creators of the social network Twitter.

In Latin America, it is estimated that by 2017 there will be 145 million smartphones sold and more than 50 billion applications installed in different mobile operating systems in the world. Reasons are simple: they allow speed and real-time processing, and, as regards the costs, they facilitate the reduction in staff and time.

Therefore, if we analyze the potential of this phenomenon and its degree of implementation at different levels, it becomes clear that there is still much to be done, to be discovered and to be implemented in this field. We should imagine, for example, how useful it would be to include these new technologies in

the prevention and reduction of risks in natural disasters or phenomena, especially in countries likely to be affected by such recurring conditions every year.

In the context towards which we are moving without delay, innovative leaders will be needed, leaders capable of turning the social networks into new conversation boards in order to plan and implement security and risk management strategies in a State. This would be very timely in the face of the warnings by the United Nations, which state that by 2050 global losses as a result of emergencies and disasters will amount to 300 billion dollars and will leave around 100,000 dead each year.

Such is the case of countries like Dominican Republic, which in the last 140 years has suffered the onslaught of 74 cyclones. One of the most recent tropical storms was called "Chantal", and threatened to become a hurricane in 2013 and the whole country was kept in suspense. Other undesired visits to the island of Hispaniola were the cyclone "George" (1998), which devastated the country with massive losses in its Gross Domestic Product -according to the Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-. Furthermore, the Caribbean country was also frequented by cyclone "David" and the storm "Federico" in 1979.

In an interview with Miguel Campusano, deputy director of the Meteorological Office of Dominican Republic, it is stated that a similar phenomenon usually occurs every two years, proving the high cyclonic frequency that threatens this Caribbean country, whose most critical point is between 15 August and 15 September.

It is important to bear in mind that Dominican Republic is now a locomotive in full swing, with enviable infrastructures and a growth rate of 6.5% reached in April 2015. It would be suitable to take advantage of this situation in order to develop the appropriate prevention mechanisms, counting on the new social interaction tools and applications which, far from playing an entertaining role, become platforms to save human lives and reduce material damage.

This purpose would fit perfectly with the task of the institutions that make up the National System for Disaster Prevention, Mitigation and Response and which face a historic opportunity to manage safety and risk, also in the virtual environments. It is to be recalled that, in the National Development Strategy by the year 2030, it is expected a long-term national plan whose fourth strategic focus considers the achievement of an effective risk management and the minimization of human, economic and environmental losses on the basis of an active participation of local communities and governments.

Against this background that is part of a well-defined outlook of public policies, it should not be forgotten that emergencies will continue to happen every year in the region of the Caribbean, and will continue to be associated with the cyclone season, and



Chantal's path according to the National Hurricane Center in Miami. NOAA/NHC/Google Earth

this is where the timely communication could save lives. Especially now, when conversations flow and virtual realities are built at the same time as what occurs in the physical space.

In this context, the perception about security becomes more important as a media topic in societies and the strategy emerges as the roadmap that will determine the debate. Social networks, as human creations, are at the service of humans but for useful, preventive purposes, especially available to disabled people who, in the midst of events of social upheaval, become vulnerable targets.

When addressing this issue, some questions arise about how digital communication and the education role –also from the university area– can contribute to risk reduction, considering the last meeting held in Guayaquil, Ecuador, as a reference, regarding the consultations some experts made in relation to the International Post 2015 Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), where risk reduction commitments were adopted by governments throughout the world.

Along the same lines, recent research carried out in Dominican Republic¹ proves the influence and contribution of digital communication via the social network Twitter in national security and risk management strategies. In the study, the conversations that took place from the exchange of messages during the tropical storm “Chantal” –storm that was formed in the month of July during the cyclonic season of 2013²– were analyzed, achieving a greater impact among the cyber-connected communities.

The data show, through hashtags (#), that Twitter messages inspired, mobilized and provided dynamism to the conversation that took place during the weather phenomenon between all audiences, included the Dominican State. The information collected also reveals the users’ capacity to influence, touched by one single cause in an emergency situation.

After the phenomenon, as shown by the mentioned research, civilian and military high command authorities in Dominican Republic stated that social networks are removing reporting barriers and formalities. They come up with the only desire of knowing the details of a weather disaster or risk in depth. Therefore, the messages from the authorities and actors involved must be better targeted than ever and used in the three fields of action of a crisis: prevention, warning and quick access to the affected communities.

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MEXICO AND GUATEMALA, SHARED REALITIES

In countries not very far from Dominican Republic like Mexico and Guatemala which, unfortunately, are not oblivious to frequent natural disasters, these tools have been implemented in an effective and practical way:

In 2011, the former Mexican President, Felipe Calderón, in light of the threat of Hurricane Karl, warned about it via Twitter. From that moment, it was agreed that all warnings’ coordinating bodies would inform citizens via the media and, especially, via Twitter.

For its part, the Government of Guatemala, through the Coordinadora Nacional para la Reducción de Desastres (CONREP), recommends the use of social networks during emergencies. Guatemala is a country that is not exactly exempt from natural disasters. Two years ago, given its intense volcanic activity, one of the worst earthquakes since the 1970s struck, affecting mainly the region of Totonicapán.

This body, CONREP, develops a series of computer graphics recommending directly the use of social networks. Thus, it adds: *“During a disaster, emergency or risk situation, the public infrastructure and communication networks of the place you live in could present problems. This would prevent you from communicating with others, to ask for help or simply to tell someone how you feel”. “It is important to know which social networks are the most appropriate ones to use during an emergency. These could be of great help not only for you, but also for those who are with you at that time. Get to know them so that you can use them in an adverse situation”.*

In the same vein, particularly Twitter stands out *“for its speed and immediacy, the most helpful in emergency cases...”*. Or Facebook as *“the ideal medium to tell your relatives how you feel”.*

They do not overlook Youtube: *“In an emergency situation, a video can help others understand what is happening...”*. Or Flickr, *“the perfect network to show others what occurs in an emergency...”*.

Dominican Republic, a country with more than 3 million Facebook accounts and more than a million Twitter accounts –almost half of the country’s population, according to the Dominican Institute for Telecommunications– and for which, like other nations in the Caribbean, it takes too long to recover from its tragedies, is being called to adopt these new communication tools for the mitigation of its risks.

¹ Research *Influencia y contribución de la comunicación digital a través de la red social Twitter en las estrategias de seguridad y gestión del riesgo del Estado* (Influence and contribution of digital communication via the social network Twitter in the State’s security and risk management strategies) was presented as a dissertation project at the Global Institute for Higher Studies in Social Sciences and the Institute Ortega y Gasset in Madrid.

² Cyclonic season: Period starting on 1 June and finishing on 30 November, in which hurricane formation involving economic, material and human losses for the Dominican State is more common.



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