DHS Science and Technology Directorate
Social Media Use during Disasters

Purpose

Many Americans consider the Internet **their preferred information source** and the **most reliable source for news**.[1] During disasters, online activity increases, and the public frequently turns to social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to relay and gather information. Given the growing importance of social media as a disaster communication tool, it is vital to understand how individuals use, behave, and interpret information on social media sites in order to better inform policy, guidance, and operations and to ensure that emergency managers, first responders, and policy makers can best optimize how they use these tools. This requires answering important questions such as:

- How does the public use social media differently from traditional mass media to learn about disasters?
- How does the public perceive the credibility of disaster information disseminated via social media?
- To what extent, if at all, do social media increase disaster resilience?
- What are the public's expectations of emergency managers' social media use in disaster communication?

Impact

It is generally assumed that emergency managers should use social media to communicate about disasters, but there are few evidence-based guidelines. For example, a 2010 American Red Cross survey found an alarming 75% of 1,058 respondents expected help to arrive within an hour if they posted a request on a social media site.[2] By conducting a survey with a nationally representative adult sample, the first phase of this project will provide emergency managers, first responders, and policy makers with empirically based guidelines for using social media tools to best communicate with the public on how to prepare for, respond to, mitigate, and recover from national emergencies.

[1] Zogby Interactive. (2009). Poll: Online news sources top all others. Retrieved from http://pww.org/article/view/16025.
[2] American Red Cross. (2010). Social media in disasters and emergencies. Retrieved from http://www.redcross.org/www-files/Documents/pdf/other/SocialMediaSlideDeck.pdf.

Products

- **Detailed Research Summary**– An extensive review of social science literature pertaining to social media use during disasters, along with case examples.
- **Nationally Representative Survey** - To help better understand adults' information seeking and sharing behaviors during disasters, communication behaviors during disasters, and ratings of disaster information source credibility.
- **White Paper** – A white paper integrating the research summary with findings from the survey.
- **Briefing Materials** – PowerPoint slide deck and handout summarizing the white paper.
- **Methodological Template** – Full stimuli used in the survey, plus proposed next steps.
- **Anonymized Data** –Data with identifying information removed.

Core Research Team

Research team members are **Dr. Brooke Fisher Liu**, associate professor and START affiliated faculty member, University of Maryland (principal investigator); **Dr. Yan Jin**, associate professor, Virginia Commonwealth University (lead investigator); and **Julia Daisy Fraustino**, doctoral student, University of Maryland (graduate research assistant).