

How to Use Social Media to Better Engage People Affected by Crises

A brief guide for those
using social media
in humanitarian
organizations

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Rationale for this brief guide

In the past few years, the role of social media and digital technologies in times of disasters and crises has grown exponentially. During disasters like the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, and the 2015 Nepal earthquake, for instance, Facebook and Twitter were crucial components of the humanitarian response, allowing mostly local, but also international actors involved in relief efforts, to disseminate lifesaving messages. They also offered affected communities a channel to seek help, reconnect with their families and provide feedback on the assistance received so that programmes could be adapted, when possible.

Existing studies show that digital communications channels can be critical before, during and after natural disasters, crises and armed conflicts, to save lives and reduce suffering (e.g. by disseminating of early warning messages and safety tips, helping people to reconnect with their loved ones, directing affected people to humanitarian services...). However, the use of social media by humanitarian organizations to engage and communicate with (not about) affected people is, to date, still vastly untapped, and largely under researched and documented in terms of the provision of practical guidance, both thematically and technically, good practices and lessons learned.

This brief guide, initiated by the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and developed with support from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), is a living document that aims to address this.

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Volunteers from the South Sudan Red Cross are trained to effectively use technology as part of their work. Juozas Cernius / IFRC

1. What's in this guide?



Online communication platforms have become a lifeline for millions of people affected by natural disasters and armed conflicts: social media and messaging apps help maintain contact with family and friends, and provide access to information, such as where to find food, shelter or medical assistance. This information can directly influence how people prepare for, respond to and recover from different types of crises.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) and the larger humanitarian community are strengthening their ability for two-way communication with affected people to improve how humanitarian organizations listen to affected people's needs, concerns and complaints. This is vital to respect and uplift the dignity and resilience of affected people, and improve the quality and accountability of humanitarian programmes.

This brief guide provides practical tips and advice on how to use social media effectively to engage with, and be accountable to, affected people. It is primarily for staff who are responsible for the official social media channels in their organization.

Related topics, such as social media marketing or fundraising, are not covered in this guide. Also, keep in mind that social media does not replace other forms of communication, but is merely an additional channel through which you can engage affected communities.

Why community engagement is vital

Community engagement means enabling affected people to participate in determining their own needs and finding their own solutions. By engaging and sharing responsibility with affected people, humanitarian organizations secure better relations and acquire invaluable insights, improving the overall effectiveness of their programs. The [“Red Cross Red Crescent Guide to Community Engagement and Accountability”](#) explains the benefits of community engagement in more depth, and contains many practical tips as well as an extensive [online toolkit](#). [Find out more ...](#)

2. Which social media platforms are important?

Don't try to be on too many social media platforms at once. It is better to limit yourself to fewer platforms and to ensure that you have the resources to be present and respond to questions.

Deciding on your ideal platforms depends on your country and target audience. In most countries, Facebook will be a central element of your community engagement strategy on social media, because it is by far the largest network. Twitter, on the other hand, is much smaller in many countries but used by many influencers and journalists.

If you are not sure which social media platforms you should use in your country, or for a certain demographic, try these approaches:



Meet your audience where they are:

Ask the people you want to reach which platforms they use. Also ask colleagues, staff and volunteers who are in contact with them.



Research online:

[We Are Social](#) releases annual reports on mobile phone, internet and social media use in many countries and for all regions of the world. You can also just google “Most popular social media in [name of country]”. In addition, some of the media landscapes from [BBC Media Action](#), the [European Journalism Centre](#) and the [CDAC Network](#) can help you understand how people are accessing information.



Include questions on communication channels in needs assessments:

Are your colleagues going to the field to do an assessment or for a regular visit? Ask them to find out what communication channels affected people use and trust. You can find guidance on which questions to include in the [CDAC and ACAPS needs assessment toolkit](#) and the [Community Engagement and Accountability Toolkit](#).

While this document focuses primarily on Facebook and Twitter, most of the ideas discussed on the following pages can also be applied to other social networks, such as Instagram, VKontakte or WeChat.

Free social media course

[Sharing the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on Social Media](#) is a free online course that looks at staff and volunteer engagement, content planning and social media monitoring.

3. How to build proximity and trust online



Proximity to affected people as well as trust are at the heart of all Red Cross and Red Crescent activities, before, during and after an emergency. This includes digital activities and the ability to be present remotely and virtually.

Both offline and online, people are more likely to trust those with whom they have personal bonds, such as family or friends. In addition, some people may trust certain civil society personalities, politicians, celebrities and athletes, experts in specific organizations and members of the media.

10 tips to building proximity and trust on social media:



Add value:

The information you share as part of your community engagement activities should be life-saving, useful or actionable. Put yourself in the shoes of your audience, find out what kind of information and advice people may need, and try to meet those needs.



Be present:

Demonstrate that you are willing to engage in a dialogue with others. Ask questions and respond to comments. Try to respond to or acknowledge each comment within 24 hours. (See also: [“How do I deal with criticism, negative and abusive comments?”](#) and [“How do I work with colleagues from programmes?”](#))



Be human:

A personable communication style tends to be most successful on social media. People trust other people, not faceless logos or organizations. Make sure you sound like a “human being” and show interest and compassion.



Connect with others:

Build a network of influencers by following them and liking or sharing their content. This includes other humanitarian organizations. Don't be afraid to reach out to them directly. Over time, some will follow you back and may help spread your messages.



Involve your audience:

Involve your target audience when producing content, particularly audio and video. Aside from accepted and trusted local authority figures, people are more likely to trust those who are in a similar position to themselves or have a similar background. Equally important, affected people need to be able to tell their own stories and request support and accountability.



Be timely and consistent:

Provide consistent information when it is needed, and in optimal formats. If you publish life-saving information too late, contradict yourself or use formats that are not relevant, people will lose faith in you. Prepare messages and workflows in advance, so that you can react to a crisis quickly and consistently. (See: "Annex 1: Creating message libraries and FAQs")



Make sure that you have most of the necessary facts, and can refer to a relevant source, before sharing something on social media or responding to a comment. Nothing destroys trust more quickly than sharing wrong information.



Be accountable:

Mistakes happen. When they do, acknowledge that something has gone wrong and say what you are doing to fix the situation. Involve your programme and communications colleagues where relevant. It is almost always better to correct a mistake publicly than to delete an erroneous post and pretend nothing happened.



Know your limits and be transparent about them:

Acknowledge what you don't know. You won't be able to answer every single question. If a situation is still developing, or if you need time to find the information, don't be afraid to say so. If you know another organization who might have the answer, share a link to a relevant post or their social media profile.



Verify your accounts:

Most social media platforms have a system to highlight accounts whose identity has been verified. By verifying your account, you demonstrate that you are who you say you are. Twitter and Facebook accept applications for verification; other networks only verify high profile accounts when they believe it is necessary. Contact your communications focal point, or social media manager in headquarters, if you want to reach out to representatives from any of these companies to verify your account.



A blue badge next to profiles on Facebook (left) and Twitter (right) indicates that these accounts have been verified.

4. Social media listening: How do I get started?

All social media platforms include free tools to follow conversations within the platform. However, there are also many commercial and free tools that make social media monitoring and analysis easier. Within the Movement, [Hootsuite](#) (free, basic account), [Brandwatch](#) (not free) and [Social Studio](#) (not free) are widely used tools. Which tool is right for you will – among other things – depend on your budget, the time you are willing to invest, and the languages you want to monitor.

The Global Disaster Preparedness Center produced an in-depth “[Comparative Review of Social Media Analysis Tools for Preparedness](#)” in 2015, which compares 31 tools according to different use cases.

Irrespective of the tool(s) you choose, here are some tips to help you get started with social media listening:

- ④ **Develop a routine:** Keeping an eye on social media and engaging with people through these social platforms should become a habit. That does not mean that you need to be on social media constantly: when no emergency is in sight, setting 30 minutes per day aside might be enough. This will help you get to know your audience and influencers, and monitor what is being said about the activities of your organization. During times of crises, or when an emergency is developing, you will need to increase this time commitment substantially.
- ④ **Show that you are listening:** Acknowledge messages on your social media profiles, even if it is just by liking a comment (if appropriate), or saying “Thank you for your message.” Personalize the message to show that a fellow human being is behind the answer.

EXAMPLE 1:

European refugee crisis: In-depth social media listening

In 2016, UNHCR started an in-depth social media listening project to better understand what refugees and migrants were discussing on their way to Europe. The team collected and analysed conversations in multiple languages, and was able to get insights into how the smuggling industry changed from week to week, following different world events. Changes included fluctuations in prices for different routes, but also the arrival of “asylum consultants”, who offered to prepare people for asylum interviews. In parallel to social media monitoring, UNHCR staff conducted focus groups to better understand the information needs and trusted information channels of persons of concern.

[Read more...](#)

- ③ **Find out where people are talking about relevant issues:** Identify external networks, groups and channels where people talk about topics that are related to the work of your organization. For example: the Facebook page of a town that is affected by flooding, or a Facebook group where members of the diaspora discuss issues related to a conflict back home.
- ③ **Make listening an organization-wide activity:** Encourage your colleagues and volunteers to send you relevant links they may come across online.
- ③ **Create jargon-free search terms:** Only insiders use technical terms such as “restoring family links” on social media. Instead, people write “I’m looking for my sister” in their posts. Make sure that your search terms reflect the way people write.
- ③ **Refine your search queries** to eliminate irrelevant results, and to ensure that you are not missing important discussions. This [guide to Twitter advanced search](#) could be useful.
- ③ **Sometimes it is better to talk about things in private.** Implement and promote ways through which your audience can interact with you privately.
 - ▷ Facebook administrators can set up their pages so that a Facebook Messenger window appears automatically. Find out more [about this feature here](#), and view a short video on [how to enable private messaging](#).
 - ▷ Twitter is currently in the process of making it easier for brands to talk to customers via direct messages. Find out more information about how to use direct messaging, including how to receive direct messages from anyone, [here](#).
 - ▷ You can also always tell someone, in a comment, to send you a private message or an email.

More information:

- ③ [Social Listening: What it is, Why You Should Care, and How to Do it Well](#) (Hootsuite; Jun '17)
- ③ [Hashtag Standards for Emergencies](#) (OCHA; Oct' 14)

EXAMPLE 2:

Nepal: Hitting the right nail on the head through social media listening

One of the goals of an ACAPS social media monitoring project in Nepal was to better understand which topics were important to communities affected by multiple earthquakes in 2015. To the surprise of the team, results for shelter related activities initially included many irrelevant results discussing beauty salons. The reason: the search terms for shelter materials included the word “nails” and a substantial number of people were posting about pedicures on Twitter, using phrases such as, “I got beautiful nails!”. By regularly refining the search queries in English and Nepali, the team was able to reduce irrelevant results and include discussions that had initially not been found. [Read more...](#)

4.1. How do I deal with criticism, negative and abusive comments?

Being accountable means listening to what people have to say, and taking their feedback seriously regardless of whether you agree, disagree, like or dislike those views.

→ **Negative comments and criticism:**

- ▷ Don't remove comments just because they criticize your organization. Instead, try to respond to the comments, while documenting and collecting the criticism. Remember that criticism is feedback! A lot of times, people are simply frustrated and want to be heard. You can defuse a situation by showing that you are listening and taking them seriously.
- ▷ Share criticism with programme [colleagues on a regular basis](#), and discuss possible responses with them. Discuss with them how often, and how, they would like to receive this information from you.
- ▷ For recurring issues, include your answers in your FAQ and message library.
- ▷ While your natural impulse should be to respond to everyone within 24 hours, sometimes it is better not to engage too much when someone tries to be intentionally disruptive.
- ▷ Keep an eye out for negative comments from particularly influential social media users, as answering them might require extra effort.

→ **Abusive comments:** If someone threatens you or your colleagues or posts hateful messages, you can delete the comments. In extreme cases, print the comments or make screenshots and inform the security team or the police. In addition, all social media platforms have mechanisms through which you can report abusive behaviour.

→ **Inappropriate comments:** There are also some very specific cases in which you may have to remove comments, even though they are not abusive. Examples include comments that list the personal details of missing children, or other people with protection needs, or (links to) images/videos that are violent or disturbing. In these cases, you should remove the comment, but mention publicly why you have removed it. Consider listing your "house rules", which explain what is inappropriate content (see [this example from the Irish Red Cross](#)).

5. Preparedness: How can I be social media ready?



Successful community engagement in a humanitarian crisis depends a lot on your preparation. The earlier you start, the better. Please note that almost all activities described in this section continue to be relevant throughout the emergency phase.

5.1. What resources and processes do I need to have in place?

At a minimum, you should prepare the following:

- ③ **Someone in charge:** Designate at least one trained person per language who has social media monitoring and engagement as part of their job description, and is familiar with your existing social media guidelines.
- ③ **Basic social media guidelines:** Clearly define the objectives of your social media platforms, who can post on social media, what s/he can do without needing sign off, and who is responsible for signing off on all other social media messages. Contact your social media manager in headquarters if you need help drafting some basic guidelines.
- ③ **A good working relationship with programmes** (see also: [How do I work with programmes?](#)): Meet with programme staff early and regularly, and understand their priorities and needs. Explore how you can provide them with feedback during a crisis, and how they can provide you with inputs and answers.
- ③ **A message library and draft FAQ:** Many issues and questions can be anticipated during the preparedness phase. Together with your programme colleagues, develop documents and tools that will help you answer questions quickly and consistently on different social media platforms. (see also: [Creating message libraries and FAQs](#))



The Philippines Red Cross uses its message library to help people prepare ahead of approaching storms. The standardized messages that are part of the image on the left are combined with information on the current typhoon on the right. Note that the Philippines Red Cross also includes all of their social channels as part of the image.

- **A budget to spend on:**
 - ▷ [Facebook or Twitter advertisement](#). An initial budget of 300 US dollars per month, during the response phase, is a good start.
 - ▷ Social media management and analytics tools. The costs range from “free” to “very expensive”. Make sure to test and familiarize yourself with different tools to see what meets your needs (see also: [“Social media listening: How do I get started?”](#)).
 - ▷ Local designers and audio/video specialists to help you produce content in different formats (e.g. short videos, infographics ...).
- **A network:** To use social media effectively in a crisis, you need to have a network of people who trust you, and who are willing to amplify your voice. While you are building your social media channels, reach out to influencers like local bloggers, journalists, or other people with an audience. If possible, try to meet them and build a personal relationship, rather than only a virtual one.
- **A space for discussion with other humanitarian organizations:** Establish a forum through which you can exchange information and discuss messages with your counterparts in other organizations or government institutions. This can be a formal structure, an occasional, informal meeting, or even a WhatsApp group.
- **Decide what you are going to measure, and how.** Decide what you want to report to show the impact of your work. Not all social media metrics are meaningful, and some data is difficult to get retroactively. (see also, [“How do I measure success \(or failure\)?”](#))

EXAMPLE 3:

Bangladesh: Working together to produce consistent, life-saving messages

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster prone countries in the world. To ensure that consistent warnings and advice reach as many people as possible, aid organizations harmonized their messages through a national coordination platform. The process, which took about two years, was led by BBC Media Action. The Bangladesh Red Crescent Society is one of the members of the platform.

After the government had approved the messages, the platform members turned them into different formats such as videos, images with text, and cartoons. These content items were then tested to see whether they were easily understandable, and to find out what resonated most with the target audiences. The process showed that videos with a doctor, as well as cartoons, were among the most effective ways to get the messages across.

The platform members then approached Bangladesh’s top Facebook pages – many of which belong to the media – and defined a simple workflow through which they could share the prepared content in an emergency. During a comparatively mild cyclone in 2017, the disaster preparedness messages reached 800,000 people, and the videos were seen 300,000 times on social media. Some of this reach was achieved with the help of Facebook ads.

5.2. How do I work with colleagues from programmes?

Working closely with your programme colleagues is essential. For your collaboration to be a success, you have to become an operational asset: help them promote services/activities/campaigns for affected people so they are aware and can effectively access them.

You are going to receive feedback from people: share this with colleagues from programmes. It is very important that you get your colleagues' input, in order to provide meaningful and timely answers to both general and specific questions on social media about your services and activities. This will make sure that you close the “feedback loop”.

To help you establish a good working relationship with colleagues from programmes, here are some tips:

- ② **Know what your colleagues from programmes do:** Try to understand not just what your organization does but how it does it. This will help you understand how your colleagues operate, and be able to explain certain aspects to your audience when needed.
- ② **Build relationships with key programmes:** Attend some of the relevant coordination meetings, and set up regular bilateral meetings to be up to date on operations, challenges and opportunities, and to discuss their needs in terms of social media outreach.
- ② **Identify focal points and build strong relations:** Agree who, from which programme, will be your focal point. Meet with them regularly, understand their work, and explore how you can add value. This includes enhancing their outreach, supplying them with feedback about how their services/programmes are perceived, and helping them establish another channel for two-way communication to address suggestions, complaints or concerns.

EXAMPLE 4:

Syria: What's inside a food parcel?

In 2016, the ICRC in Syria made changes to food parcels, doubling the amount of food they contained. This was done because the time between food distributions was becoming longer, as security continued to deteriorate. As a result each food package had to last longer. To explain the change, the Communications and the Economic Security departments jointly produced a [short video](#) which was shared on Facebook. Viewed over 50,000 times, the video received hundreds of comments, including requests to “double the amount of sunflower oil,” or “improve the quality of the carton [box], to avoid materials inside being destroyed during transfers”. The social media team replied to each and every comment. For instance, when a user raised the possibility of adding infant milk, the organization explained that milk could not be distributed in Syria due to uncertain hygiene conditions, placing children at risk of dehydration or diarrhoea. Where comments could not be replied to in full, the delegation thanked users and assured them that their feedback had been taken into account by the Economic Security department.

EXAMPLE 5:

Syria: Tracking water distribution points from your phone

When a water main broke in Aleppo, northern Syria, in July 2015, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the Aleppo Water Board, and the ICRC cleaned 56 drinking water points and set up water tanks across the city. As part of that project, the Water and Habitat and the Communication teams of the ICRC in Syria posted a map on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) to inform local residents where they could find water. The teams also requested feedback, to help them improve the service. By August, they had published an additional version of the map that could be used on smartphones, and which helped people locate their closest water point. Facebook posts related to the water points initiative reached ten times as many people as regular posts about other ICRC activities in Syria. More info: [“Syrians discover new use for mobile phones – finding water”](#) (Reuters, October 2014) and [“A 21st-Century Migrant’s Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone”](#) (New York Times, August 2015).

- ③ **Agree on how you are going to collaborate:** Discuss how to best organize your collaboration to, for example, agree on what can be prepared ahead of a new emergency, how (i.e. in which format) you are going to share the feedback you receive, how will you update the FAQs and the message library or how you are going to work together during an emergency. Co-developing a [message library and an FAQ](#) is a good initial exercise to get to know each other. It will also help everyone understand what needs to be done in the event of an emergency.
- ③ **Share content with programme colleagues:** Many of your colleagues are on social media as well. Make sure to share relevant content with them, so that they can easily share it through one of their channels. Messages prepared in advance and images are well suited for this purpose, and can be easily shared internally through email.

EXAMPLE 6:

Haiti: Addressing concerns and improving programmes through local voices

Internews has dedicated community liaison officers who go to affected communities and collect questions, concerns and feedback during humanitarian response operations.

Following Hurricane Matthew, in Haiti, they found that some people were unsure whether water purification tablets were healthy. To address these concerns, Internews and their local media partner Ayibopost produced a short video, in which a Haitian doctor explained why it was important to treat water, and that the tablets were safe. This video was shared via social media and through other online platforms. In addition, an international NGO adapted their water and sanitation information material. [Read more...](#)

5.3. How can I identify and connect with influencers?

Both online and offline, influencers can make a critical difference to help you understand what people are interested in and concerned about. They can also spread your messages and potentially bring important feedback into your programmes.

Your social media influencer mapping should be informed by your offline influencer mapping: if your target audience is very religious, influencers might include religious leaders and groups; if your target audience is young, influencers might include musicians and athletes etc. Whoever you identify as influencers offline, and this will include key local media organizations and media personalities, try to find them on social media and reach out or follow them. Try to meet them in person as well, and not just online, so that you can build a personal relationship with them.

In countries with recurring crises, consider contacting influencers directly in the preparedness phase, to explore if they can support your communications efforts. Multiple National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have been successful with this approach.

If your influencers are on Twitter, you can easily go one step further: very often, influencers have thousands or tens of thousands of followers, but follow only very few people themselves. In July 2017, for example, OCHA in South Sudan had 24,000 followers, but only followed 400. Manually looking through the list of people whom influencers follow can lead to additional contacts. In addition, tools like [Re-follow](#) (from US\$ 20 per month), [Audiense Connect](#) (from US\$ 31.15 per month), [Righ Relevance](#) or [Twitonomy](#) can help you analyse larger groups of people on Twitter to identify influencers.

Another great way to identify influencers is to look at public Twitter lists that known influential accounts have created, or to find lists on Google by using this query on Google search: **site: twitter.com/* /lists keyword.**

For example:



The idea is to presume that some other people and/or organizations may have already compiled lists of influential accounts on a topic or country, so finding these and analysing them, rather than starting from scratch, is a good way to go.

6. Emergency response: What now?



During an emergency, you need to build on and continue the activities you started in the preparedness phase.

All social media activities should be linked to your programme objectives (e.g. save lives and improve the effectiveness and accountability of programmes) and communications goals (e.g. inform the general public and the media, local and international, about the situation on the ground).

Tips to help you engage with people during emergencies:

- ③ **Produce timely, actionable and useful content that meets your audience's needs:** Your priority is to help save and improve lives, direct affected people to available services and enable them to inform and guide the response. By [listening to the affected people](#) you will know what their most urgent information needs are. Try to address those needs by producing relevant content.
- ③ **Respond:** People demand and expect answers. Try to respond as quickly as possible, including, when relevant, why the organization is not able to help them. A continuously updated [FAQ document](#) can help you deal with a sudden increase in questions and comments. On Facebook, make sure to actively look for groups created by affected people, since this is where they are most likely to ask for information. Being active on external Facebook groups and pages also provides you with an opportunity to correct misinformation, and address negative perceptions.
- ③ **Make the feedback loop visible:** In cases where you have received input from programme staff, mention this clearly in your posts/comments. By demonstrating that you are a link to programmes, you can show that feedback and questions lead to programmatic responses.
- ③ **Manage expectations:** If you cannot answer a question immediately, try to indicate when people can expect to hear back from you.
- ③ **Identify new influencers:** New influencers emerge during crises. Identify them by monitoring relevant keywords and hashtags. The tools mentioned [in the previous section](#) can help.

EXAMPLE 7:

Ecuador: Frequently asked questions after an earthquake

When an earthquake hit Ecuador in April 2016, many people turned to the Ecuadorian Red Cross for help. In the immediate aftermath of the quake, the National Society received up to 200 messages per hour via social media. Many of these questions were identical, e.g. how could the Red Cross help find relatives, or where to donate blood. To deal with the large number of similar questions, the Ecuadorian Red Cross quickly created a page on their website, and a micro-site with the most frequently asked questions. Altogether, those pages were visited more than 200,000 times. The team also pro-actively shared timely and key information depending on the evolving situation. For example, following aftershocks, they shared information that advised people on what to do in case of an emergency.

EXAMPLE 8:

Kenya: How Kenyans use social media to flag road accidents

The Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) actively monitors social media platforms to find out about road accidents, and to dispatch ambulances to those locations. As Kenyans learned that KRCS can be relied on to respond quickly on social media, many people started to actively inform the National Society through Facebook and Twitter about incidents. KRCS found that following up on questions and updating the public about evolving situations are some of the most important social media activities, because it can reduce anxiousness, stop misinformation, and solicit support from the public.

- **Rumours:** You will come across false information and rumours when listening to social media conversations. The [CDAC Network's guide to working with rumours](#) (2017) can help you understand the motivation behind rumours (e.g. fear, wishful thinking, hostility), provides guidance on when you need to react to a rumour (e.g. when it can cause harm), and includes advice on how to respond to rumours. You can also encourage users to send you information via private messages if they are unsure of the accuracy of the information.
- **If you can't help – who can?** When you receive a question that has nothing to do with the work of your organization, try to refer to one that might have the answer. Where possible, [tag these organizations](#) in your replies, so that they are automatically notified.



What information does your audience need right now? Left: The Sri Lanka Red Cross shared the number of their tracing service after a disaster, to help people find their relatives. Right: Before hurricane Irma, the Antigua & Barbuda Red Cross shared practical information on how to prepare for possible flooding.

6.1. How can I produce useful and effective content?

Information and communications needs differ greatly depending on the type of crisis and change over time. However, people are overwhelmingly looking for information from the Movement and other humanitarian organizations to:

- **Get advice on how to find safety** and stay safe.
- **Access assistance**, from water, food or shelter to medical support, education and job opportunities.
- **Reconnect with family members** and friends in the immediate aftermath of a crisis.

You will be able to address many urgent communication needs by focusing on these three general categories.

In addition, here are some tips that will help you produce meaningful and effective content for disaster affected people:

- **Involve members of the affected community** as much as possible, from choosing topics to producing content. This will give your messages more credibility and means that you are more likely to produce content that is relevant for your audience.
- **Translate** content in all relevant languages.
- **Avoid jargon!** Test whether your message is understood by your target audience. Run separate tests for each language.
- **Test different content formats with your target audience.** Find out whether text, images, videos, or a combination work best. For video content, test different speakers/presenters if possible.
- **Timing** is very important:
 - ▷ **Time of the day or day of the week:** Learn about the habits of your target audience(s) and find out when they are using social media. Use a free tool such as [Hootsuite](#) or [Buffer](#) to schedule your content for the optimal times. Remember to adjust schedules if the situation is changing.
 - ▷ **Phase of the disaster response:** Consider the situation of the affected people and time your content accordingly. For example: share content related to receiving immediate assistance at the beginning of a crisis, while sharing content related to rebuilding and recovering after a few days have passed.

THINK before you post

An easy and quick way to evaluate social media messages before posting is to THINK:

T = is it **true**?

H = is it **helpful**?

I = is it **inspiring**?

N = is it **necessary**?

K = is it **kind**?

Additional information on producing effective content:

- [Infographic: The Optimal Length for Every Social Media Update and More](#) (Buffer; March 2016)
- [CDC's Guide to Writing for Social Media](#) (CDC; January 2014)
- [The Art of Listening: Social Media Toolkits for Non-profits](#) (Greenline; October 2013)
- [Social Engagement Handbook Version 2.0](#) (American Red Cross; 2012)

6.1.1. What content formats should I choose?

Don't be afraid to experiment with different types of content and formats to find out what works best for your audience. In addition to consulting social media analytics tools, make sure to speak directly with your audience to understand why they prefer one type of content over another, or if they have ideas for entirely different content.

As a rule of thumb, visual content such as images or videos perform better on social media than text. A few general guidelines:

- Use **text** if you need to share information very quickly, or if internet connections are very slow.
- Prioritize **images**, or images overlaid with text, to help your message stand out. Note that the Facebook algorithm might give your image a lower priority if it is covered with a lot of text – up to 25% is generally considered to be “safe”.
- Images can also be **cartoons, drawings, infographics or animated GIFs**.

A small selection of software you can use to produce images:

Images (with and without text overlays)

- [Pablo](#) (free; online)
- [Canva](#) (free; paid options available; [non-profit](#) discount available; online)

Infographics and charts:

- [Infogram](#) (free; paid options available; nonprofit discount available; online)
- [PiktoChart](#) (US\$ 39.99 per year [for non-profits](#); online)

EXAMPLE 9:

Indonesia: Timely and immediately useful – assisting travelers on the road

Right before Eid festivities, many Indonesians hit the road. To help people get to their destinations safely, the Indonesian Red Cross Society (PMI) developed a Twitter hashtag campaign in 2017. PMI used #TanyaPMI (“ask PMI”) to share road safety tips and to respond to individual inquiries. Many questions were related to the location and availability of rest areas and first aid facilities along travel routes. Where help was needed, the social media manager contacted first aid stations and ambulance services. In addition to Twitter, PMI also reached out to travellers via Facebook and their first aid app. In total, PMI reached more than one million people across the country. Read more [here](#).



Images combined with text can be an effective way to share information across different networks. This example addresses a rumour that phones should be switched off ahead of a potential emergency. Image: Internews

Videos are particularly useful if you want to walk people through a process. Videos are also a good way to reach people who cannot read. The downside of videos is that they require a comparatively good internet connection. Most social networks limit the length of pre-recorded videos you can post. Irrespective of the maximum permitted duration, the most successful videos are less than 2 minutes long. Live video broadcasts can be longer.

Adding subtitles is highly recommended, since many people watch videos with the sound off.

A small selection of software to produce videos for social media:

- ➔ [Adobe Premier Clip](#) (free; Android, iOS)
- ➔ [Adobe Spark](#) (free with Adobe branding; online and on iOS, Android versions is supposed to be released soon)
- ➔ Quik Video Editor (free; [Android](#), [iOS](#), [Windows](#), [MacOS](#))
- ➔ [Giphy](#) (free; any browser, helps you create animated GIFs)
- ➔ [Amara](#) (free, an online service that helps create and translate subtitles and captions)

More information:

- ➔ [Tips and tricks to get better audio and video out of your smartphone](#) (IFRC; February 2017)
- ➔ [Mobile journalism](#) (Al Jazeera; January 2017)

Maximum length of pre-recorded¹ videos on different platforms in minutes

Facebook	45:00
YouTube ²	15:00
Tumblr	5:00
Twitter	2:20
Instagram	1:00

- ¹ Many social media platforms allow live video broadcasts that are not affected by these limits.
- ² This becomes unlimited once the account has been verified.

EXAMPLE 10:

New Zealand: Using Facebook Live to give practical advice and respond to questions

After an earthquake damaged water and sewage pipes in New Zealand, the Red Cross used Facebook Live to show how water can be made potable, how to do the dishes without pouring water down the drain, and how to take a bucket bath. Facebook users were able to ask questions during the broadcast, and the videos could also be watched later. Take a look at one of the videos [here](#)...



6.2. Should I pay for advertising?

Reaching people on social media networks has gotten harder over the past few years, both because the competition for attention has gotten fiercer, and because social networks are trying to earn more money. By paying to promote your content or account, you can get a clear advantage. If done right, it can be money well spent.

Three thoughts before you spend money on social media advertising:

- ③ **“Everyone” is not a target audience:** Targeting ads is essential to get value for your money. You should only target those who will actually be interested in your message, instead of anyone you wish to be interested. Facebook has particularly powerful tools to identify very specific audiences. To help determine your audience, you can also [create a persona](#) of who you want to reach before you plan advertising.
- ③ **Promote content that is already doing well:** Irrelevant content doesn't improve when more people see it. If time permits, wait a few hours or a day before deciding whether to promote content through paid advertising. While it is tempting to promote content that is doing badly, promoting well performing, attractive and useful content will benefit you more in the long run.
- ③ **Prices for ads differ significantly** between different countries, languages and demographics, but an initial budget of US\$ 300 per month during the response phase of an emergency is a good start.

6.2.1. Facebook

Additional points you should know about [Facebook ads](#):

- ③ Many organizations find that **less than 5% of their Facebook fans see their content** when they don't pay for ads. The only way to guarantee that many people will see your posts is by paying for Facebook ads.
- ③ Facebook offers advertisers an unprecedented amount of detail to **define precise target audiences**. Among other things, you can target ads by language, gender, family status, age, and even interests. In Greece, for example, one organization targeted Arabic speakers who were also interested in the Facebook pages of Syrian media. This was done to narrow the target audience from “all Arabic speakers in Greece” to those Arabic speakers that are more likely to be connected to the refugee crisis.

Facebook ads are very powerful. If you want to learn more, take a look at these three articles:

- ③ [The Complete, Always-Updated Guide to Facebook Advertising](#) (Buffer; regularly updated)
- ③ [How to Create Fab but Cheap Non-profit Ads for Facebook](#) (The Balance; June 2016)
- ③ [Who Sees What and Why on Facebook](#) (Actionsprout; June 2017)

6.2.2. Twitter

By default, all content on Twitter is public, which makes it easier to find and connect with new audiences without spending money. If you think about spending money on [Twitter ads](#), consider the following:

- ③ Growing an account can take a long time on Twitter, and it may be worth spending money **to promote an account with few followers**. You should already do that during the disaster preparedness phase. Twitter allows you to target the followers of other Twitter accounts with your ads. Think about whom your target audience might already follow and trust, and then promote your account accordingly.
- ③ Twitter's system to target users by interest is less refined than Facebook's. As a result, **targeting ads by interest can be frustrating**, particularly for nonprofit users.
- ③ On the other hand, Twitter is **good at targeting ads according to keywords**. These keywords can be part of what people have posted themselves, tweets they have interacted with, or search terms they have used on Twitter.

More information:

- ③ [A Twitter Ads Guide for Non-profits](#) (Twitter; November 2014)

6.2.3. Other networks

Other social networks also offer paid advertising. Investing money to give your content an extra boost can be worthwhile. Check out:

- ③ [The Complete Guide to Instagram Ads](#) (Buffer; March 2017)
- ③ [How Snapchat is Revolutionizing Modern Day Advertising for Non-profits](#) (Social Fish; April 2016)
- ③ [Guide to Vkontakte Advertising](#) (KonstantinKanin; November 2016)
- ③ [Advertising on WeChat: a Step by Step Guide](#) (Walkthechat; April 2017)

7. How do I measure success (or failure)?



Potential indicators for your social media activities can include:

- ⊕ Increase in engagement with your content (i.e. number of likes, shares and comments).
- ⊕ Quality of engagement: have you received more/less specific, actionable questions as opposed to generic, two-word responses?
- ⊕ Growth of social media audience (i.e. number of followers).
- ⊕ Social media monitoring or direct feedback via social media, which has informed and/or led to changes in programming.
- ⊕ Decrease in the average time it takes you to respond to questions.
- ⊕ Change in negative/critical comments on your social media profiles compared to total number of comments over time.
- ⊕ Changes in the substance of negative comments: are new things being criticized? Are previous issues no longer being criticized?
- ⊕ Number of questions/comments you have responded to as well as percentage of all comments/questions that you have responded to.
- ⊕ Number of people who have read documents you published.

Discuss during the disaster preparedness phase how often you want to report on these indicators during an emergency, and which programme/communications colleagues need to receive these reports.

The built-in analytics tools that each social media platform provides, as well as the aforementioned Hootsuite, Social Studio and Brandwatch, can help you collect some of this information. In addition, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Global Disaster Preparedness Center has produced a [“Comparative Review of Social Media Analysis Tools for Preparedness”](#) that compares 31 social media analytics tools in detail.

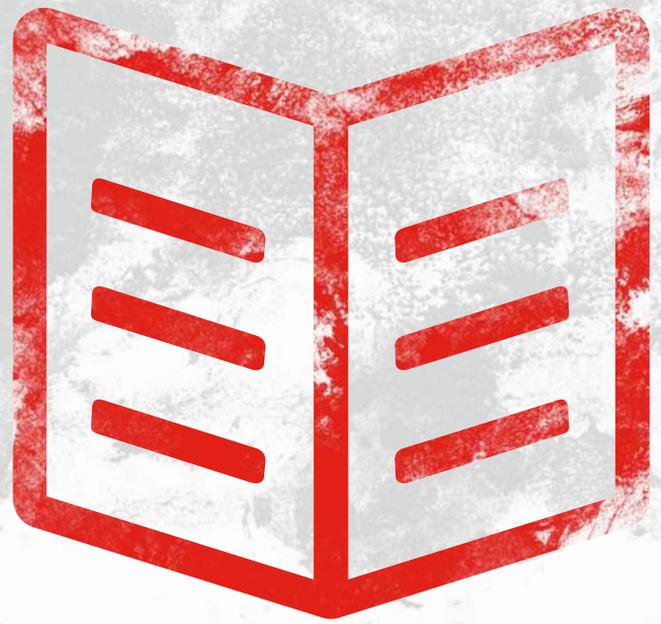
Additional resources to learn more about measuring social media:

- ➔ [Tips for Non-profits on Measuring Social Media Metrics that Matter](#) (Nonprofitquarterly; April 2017)
- ➔ [All of the Social Media Metrics That Matter](#) (Sproutsocial; October 2016)
- ➔ [The 8 Essential Social Media Metrics That Matter](#) (Buildfire; November 2016)

Facebook disaster maps

The IFRC signed an agreement with Facebook to get access to some of their user data in emergencies. Find out more [here...](#)

8. How can I learn more?



In addition to the many links shared throughout this document, the following resources can help you find out more:

- ③ [IOI Seminar Report: Social Media in Emergencies](#) (CDAC; December 2013)
- ③ [Community Engagement and Accountability Toolkit](#) (IFRC; January 2017)
- ③ [How messaging apps are changing the way people respond to humanitarian crises](#) (ITU; August 2017)
- ③ [Prepare and respond](#) (Facebook; June 2015)
- ③ [Sharing the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement on Social Media](#) (GDPC; January 2017)
- ③ [Social Media Handbook: Tips for Civil Society Users](#) (USAID; September 2016)
- ③ [Social Media for Good](#) (ongoing)

(All links were checked in September 2017).

9. Annex 1: Creating message libraries & FAQs

Most communities are exposed to threats that are recurring (e.g. seasonal storms) or that can be anticipated, either because of geological/environmental conditions (e.g. earthquakes, landslides), or because the environment is noticeably changing over time (e.g. climate change or increased tension between social groups).

In an emergency, a lot of time can be saved if relevant messages have already been written, signed off, tested and produced in different formats and languages for different audiences.

Tips for creating a message library:

- ③ Consult the [Red Cross Red Crescent Message development tool and library](#) and [the key messages for disaster risk reduction](#) to create simple and useful messages.
- ③ Reuse and adapt messages from the [CDAC message library](#). It contains messages endorsed by the humanitarian clusters in ten different languages, for 70 different types of threats - from acute respiratory infections to yellow fever, child labour or explosive remnants of war.
- ③ With the help of designers and AV specialists, pre-produce/design content in different formats, such as text, images, infographics, cartoons or videos. Check out the [community engagement and accountability library](#) for inspiration.
- ③ Test which type of content works best for your intended target audience(s).
- ③ Prepare different versions of your messages that conform to the limits of various social platforms: for example, the character limit on Twitter.

- ③ Save the content items where all team members can easily access them: for example, on a shared drive.

Together with the message library, the frequently asked questions (FAQ) document is one of the most important and useful resources during an emergency. Both the message library and the FAQ should feed into each other and be updated continuously.

Tips for creating an FAQ:

- ③ Create an internal document where you collect frequently asked questions and answers. Update this document regularly. Depending on your relationship with other humanitarian organizations, consider having a joint FAQ document.
- ③ Publish a public version of the FAQ on a dedicated webpage, and share the link to that page frequently on social media. On Facebook, you can also create a “[note](#)” with your FAQs. You might want to pin the note or link to the top of your social media timeline, so that it is always visible.
- ③ Use the FAQ to respond to questions. If possible, personalize your answers.
- ③ Try to anticipate questions as the situation is evolving.
- ③ Ensure that everybody is always working according to the latest version of the FAQ: for example, by storing it in one location, instead of sharing different versions by email.



A volunteer of the Myanmar Red Cross Society uses mobile technology to engage with community members and gather their feedback on local programs. IFRC

**If you have comments, suggestions,
or examples to improve this brief
guide, please get in touch:**



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