

# Social Networking Sites: Reinterpretation in Crisis Situations

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Participation on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has experienced a rapid increase in recent years [2,5]. Students (of all levels), corporate employees, and stay-at-home parents among others log on to sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Bebo and LinkedIn on a regular or semi-regular basis to stay updated on the status of friends and acquaintances, to network for professional reasons, and to let others know about events in their own lives [1,2,4,7,8,9].

In my work, I examine participants' interactions on SNSs, and one SNS in particular, which I will refer to as "Social Site."<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I focus on the use of Social Site for purposes other than the recreational or professional. While many researchers examine the role of SNSs in participants' social and professional lives [[1,2,4,7,8,9], I look at Social Site with regards to the role it plays in crisis and disaster situations. When researching technology use in times of crisis and disaster, I have found that Social Site is reinterpreted by many as a place of timely and accurate information exchange, as well as a place for instances of collective intelligence [6] to transpire.

## 2. INFORMATION SEEKING IN CRISIS

When a crisis or a disaster occurs, people are affected in a number of ways and require various forms of assistance and support. However, a common need for most people in such situations is timely and accurate information, which more traditional news sources are frequently unable to provide. Media outlets such as television or local newspapers often do not have intimate, inside knowledge of the event, and they are bound by journalistic regulations that demand fact checking and bureaucratic corroboration before they can release information. In addition, people are often seeking very specific information that is simply too detailed for major media outlets to address. However, when people who are affected by a disaster and who have first-hand knowledge of the event wish to share information with others, my research shows that some turn to Social Site to do so. In disaster and crisis situations, Social Site has proven to be a destination for those who wish to gather and disperse information, solve problems, and offer support.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not name the specific Social Networking Site in keeping with Human Research Committee standards.

## 3. THE REINTERPRETATION OF SOCIAL SITE

Social Site is a popular SNS that is widely used by the general public. Anyone can join Social Site, after which users create a public profile, and then designate "friends" within the system. Users can see their friends' profiles and Social Site-based activity. Social Site also allows users to join "groups" which are formed around common interests, topics or causes. If a group is "public" anyone can join, or see the group activity, such as public postings on the group "wall" (a highly visible messaging system).

I have found that when a crisis occurs, participants within Social Site can commonly define a goal that revolves around the crisis, and quickly reach that goal. This occurred specifically in the case of the Virginia Tech University shootings of April, 2007, where a group of geographically dispersed people came together on Social Site to correctly identify the list of 32 shooting victims (see [10,11] for a detailed description). The participants in this list-building activity worked together within a discussion thread, whereby someone would post a name or names of a victim/victims, and often, the source for that information. Sources ranged from links to official newspaper websites, to personal contacts (i.e. "my roommate's boyfriend was a victim.") If a source was not immediately given, those posting the information were asked to provide verification by others within the group.

What is extraordinary is that much of the list was complete before that information was officially released by the University. In addition, all information that was posted regarding the names of the victims was correct (regardless of whether sources were posted along with the initial posting of the victim name or at a later time) – participants adhered to their own journalistic or societal ethos when putting forth information about the deceased on a public forum.

Here we have a patent example of collective intelligence, whereby a group of people collaborated to commonly define and solve a problem in a timely and accurate manner. Of interest for the purposes of Social Networking research is that they chose an SNS as the locus for their activity.

In addition to the instance of collective intelligence, Social Site served an additional purpose in the aftermath of the VT shootings. One group in particular ("*Safe at VT*"<sup>2</sup>) was created for those

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the specific Social Site group has been changed.

Social Site users affiliated with Virginia Tech. Its purpose was to let others know they were safe in the aftermath of the shootings. Many VT students joined *Safe at VT*. This activity was then broadcast within Social Site, thereby alerting all those in VT students' networks that they were in fact okay.

I have also found that many Americans turned to Social Site in the lead-up to Hurricane Gustav, which made landfall in the Gulf region of the United States on September 1, 2008. Starting in late August, 2008, many Social Site groups formed with the purpose of offering support and advice, and also as a way for residents in the Gulf area to obtain and distribute important information. Preliminary results of this research show that Social Site was used as a destination to find out how to best cope with the hurricane and its effects. Participants logged on to learn where to buy generators, water, and ice. People inquired about specific neighborhoods and street intersections, and they were often rewarded with information about the status of power outages, housing damage and flooding.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This research points to the reinterpretation of SNSs, and the possibility for pushing the limits of how we now view their role in our lives. To illustrate this point, it is helpful to turn to an analogy as put forth by Deleuze and Parnet in Chia and King [3]:

“Deleuze and Parnet point to the invention of the horse stirrup, and explain how the ‘man-horse-stirrup relationship made it possible for feudal systems to emerge...the knight becomes more mobile, he can travel further, and he can even sleep on his horse.’ This initially precarious and seemingly innocuous assemblage of man-technology-animal-land eventually led to the famous Crusades during the Middle-Ages. What Deleuze and Parnet’s analysis draws out in this example is the open-ended manner in which seemingly inconsequential relationship formations can often give rise to wide-ranging as well as unexpected consequences” [3].

Though the reasons for the Crusades do not rest wholly with the ability of man to sleep on and ride his horse for great lengths of time, I refer to this example because it highlights the notion of the “wide-ranging and unexpected consequences” that may arise from a “seemingly inconsequential relationship.” Of course, I am concerned with the positive and beneficial (to all) outcomes that may result from human-technology relationships, and am wary of making leaps in logic regarding the evolution of technological innovations and where they may lead. However, due to the results of my own research, I see great possibilities in SNSs. SNSs are a relatively constant part of many lives, which places them in a position to be convenient and valuable tools that many turn to when a situation arises that calls for timely communication.

Though I focus on such uses of SNSs in disaster and crisis, my work shows that there is an abundance of possibilities for how they can be variously used. For example, in the workplace, it is worth considering the role SNSs may play regarding business continuity and the ability for personnel to quickly deal with internal crises when they have access to such an application. Overall, there are an abundance of possible situations that can benefit from people quickly coming together to gather and disperse information, and/or to work toward a common goal, and SNSs are increasingly enabling such behavior.

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