

Communication research to build societal resilience

In 2012, RMIT University invited a multidisciplinary group of 16 scholars from Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand to a research seminar to identify practical, theoretical and conceptual communication issues and challenges associated with increasing the engagement of communities in building resilience to disasters. This special issue presents a selection of papers developed as outcomes from the seminar.

Scholars from design, communication and anthropology disciplines with experience in national and/or international disaster resilience or management projects shared their expertise. The resulting debates help to frame, enhance and develop community-driven projects in the areas of communication to increase societal resilience, engagement and participation.

Scholars were in agreement that despite the rhetoric of community engagement, a coherent communication framework is noticeably absent. The challenge is how to engage while enabling and listening to the public, and how practitioners identify the skills and knowledge that is important, desirable and useful in the community. The expectations and needs of both groups must be taken into account, but the complexity of challenges, both for capturing and capitalising the best way forward, remains traditional and poorly articulated throughout the different phases of a disaster management cycle.

Some critical questions emerged as opportunities for communication researchers. Where in the cycle of disaster management does the community reside? At what stage should the community be engaged and involved as participants rather than recipients of service provision? How can they be empowered and their voices enhanced in developing the participatory potential of meaningful resilience? This is even more vital when an overemphasis on expert-driven services may replicate existing top-down (and potentially) exclusionary delivery methods and, thus, fail to meet the needs or engage the potential of communities to contribute and take ownership of “everyday” resilience (Rogers, 2013).

There are a number of opportunities for communication research to be woven into the disaster management cycle. The papers featured in this special issue provide a snapshot of the type of communication research required to strengthen societal disaster resilience.

Burnside-Lawry and Carvalho's article examines one local government's efforts to increase local-level engagement in building community disaster resilience. Presenting empirical evidence of stakeholder engagement activities that increase risk awareness and encourage collective action, the study examines communication methods to increase local-level implementation of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation.

In the second article, Dethridge and Quinn examine the role of media in community responses to disaster. The authors explore how communication technology may allow new relationships between community groups and emergency agencies, concluding that in an emergency context, our thinking about media must change from that of a linear framework of information provision to one of shared resources.

Pond continues this theme of shared resources by drawing attention to the increased interest in the use of digital communication, in particular, social media, as a means to

provide local, situation-specific information at different stages of the disaster management cycle. Pond argues that, in this context, situational awareness relies on an overly literal interpretation of information sent via the micro-blogging service Twitter.

In the article by Akama, Cooper and Mees, the authors present a communication framework for analysis. They have examined the volatile relationship between fire emergency agencies and residents at risk and call for a more deliberative and comprehensively planned communication approach to preparedness.

In the final paper in this special issue, Saputro examines communication strategies used by Information Volunteers' Strategies during the Mt. Merapi Volcano eruption in Indonesia during 2010. This study finds that information volunteers of Jalin Merapi focused on the needs of the survivors and the refugees, rather than the availability of donor's aid, to encourage the wider public to donate. Saputro highlights the use of digital media to provide donors with direct access to the survivors, thus enhancing the efficacy of aid and to facilitate repeat donations.

The need for improved communication between disaster management practitioners, governments and local communities is a growing feature of disaster management policy and practice. This special issue provides a snapshot of potential future areas for further research. In doing so, the authors make recommendations that would contribute positively to the development of policies and processes associated with community engagement, public participation and empowerment within the context of disaster management. A significant outcome of RMIT University's symposium was the commitment by international scholars to collaborate as a research group, to advance practical, theoretical and conceptual communication solutions for increasing the engagement of communities in building societal resilience to disasters. The aim is to optimise effective partnerships between local communities, cities and nations for sustainable growth of resilience now and into the future.

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Reference

- Rogers, P. (2013), "Rethinking resilience: articulating community and the UK riots", *Politics*, Vol. 33, pp. 322-333. doi:[10.1111/1467-9256.12033](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12033).