

20. Volunteers as Agents of Co-production: 'Mud armies' in emergency services

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My department, Queensland's Department of Community Safety, is a merger of Emergency Services and the former Department of Corrective Services. The department includes Emergency Management Queensland and the Fire and Ambulance Service. In my contribution to this volume I will share what I believe to be a successful case of the use of social media for the purposes of community engagement, albeit set amidst the most devastating series of natural disasters to affect the state of Queensland. It has provided an opportunity for our department and government to rethink the way we engage with the public, build resilience in communities and mobilise volunteers.

Between November 2010 and April 2011 Queensland was struck by a series of natural disasters. Extensive flooding caused by periods of heavy rainfall, destruction caused by a number of storm cells — including cyclones Tasha, Anthony and Yasi — and subsequent monsoonal flooding, resulted in the state of Queensland being declared as disaster-affected. The extreme weather conditions that Queensland experienced saw extensive, sequential natural disasters that resulted in lives being lost and unprecedented widespread devastation.

During December 2010, southern and central Queensland, including the cities of Bundaberg and Rockhampton, were most affected by the rain depression resulting from Cyclone Tasha. During this time, Rockhampton, Queensland's eighth-biggest population centre, was inaccessible to the rest of the state by air, road or rail.

In January 2011, south-east Queensland was affected by riverine and flash flooding. Toowoomba, especially, had significant flash flooding in its main street. Several people lost their lives, including a mother and her teenage son, who were swept away while driving a car down Toowoomba's main street. Even after the floodwaters had subsided, there was substantial infrastructure damage in and around the city.

However, Grantham and the Lockyer Valley were the most significantly affected by flooding. This region experienced what was later described as an 'inland tsunami' that washed away cars, houses and people with devastating force. Moreover, it happened too fast for the townspeople to react.

Ipswich also experienced a severe case of riverine flooding. The banks of the Bremer River broke causing the main street to be inundated with water. The top of a large supermarket building barely poked out of the water, while a shark was seen swimming in floodwaters nearby. As with elsewhere in the state, people were killed in Ipswich. Mostly, this was because they dared to enter the water and were swept away as a result. Sometimes people were trapped because they did not realise roads had been cut off. There were mass evacuations in Ipswich, with thousands of people affected.

In Brisbane, riverside suburbs and the CBD were inundated with water when the Brisbane River broke its banks. Brisbane's experience was different from the regional centres because its residents received plenty of warning about the flash flooding. Nonetheless, there were mass evacuations and there was no power or transport in the CBD. Homes and businesses were badly damaged and the commercial zone was essentially closed for weeks. Suncorp Stadium, the city's iconic rugby league and soccer stadium, was turned into a muddy swimming pool; Southbank, one of Brisbane's chief tourist attractions, was inundated with water.

In February 2011, north and far north Queensland were hit by category five Cyclone Yasi, which made landfall near Cardwell, between Cairns and Townsville. For those who had been in the path of the category five Cyclone Larry at nearby Innisfail in 2006, this second cyclone was particularly cruel.

The impact on Queensland of this series of natural disasters was devastating. By 11 March 2011, all of Queensland was disaster-activated. The majority of the 37 people who had been killed drowned in flash flooding. All 73 local government areas and over 210 communities were affected. Helicopters evacuated the 314 residents from the town of Theodore; the entire townships of Cardwell and Condamine were evacuated – twice each. Condamine had to be evacuated for a second time after it experienced a second flood, while Cardwell was evacuated first due to the cyclone and then because of the flood.

In total, there were 360 swift water rescues that took place from the floodwaters, 10,500 people had to be housed in evacuation centres as Cyclone Yasi struck, and 480,000 homes and businesses were affected, including 136,000 residential properties. Over 9000 kilometres of roads were damaged and nearly 5000 kilometres of the rail network was affected. Finally, 122,000 insurance claims have been lodged at an estimated cost of \$3.6 billion.

The importance of resilience

Extreme weather conditions have always been a feature of the Australian climate and, in Queensland, floods and cyclones pose the greatest threat. For that reason, disaster management has moved away from the traditional approach, which focused on response to natural disasters by our emergency services, to one focusing on resilience and shared responsibility by all sectors of the community and government to prevent and mitigate disasters.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has said in its Natural Disaster Resilience Statement that resilience is 'the capacity to prevent, mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from the impacts of disasters'. Importantly, the statement also recognises the fundamental role that volunteers play in building community resilience. One of its priorities, therefore, is to provide ongoing support for the recruitment, retention, training, equipping and maintaining of unpaid support — a key priority in Queensland, particularly because of our reliance on disaster management volunteers.

COAG has also outlined its desire to make volunteering easier. This concern was first raised in 2009 in the aftermath of Cyclone Larry in North Queensland. As a result, there is work currently being done at a national level on what is called the 'volunteer passport'. This would make it easier for people to volunteer and to work across the different volunteer organisations.

The State Emergency Service (SES) in Queensland, the organisation usually responsible for being first on the ground when a disaster strikes (particularly in the remote and regional areas of the state), is a voluntary organisation. And, although Emergency Management Queensland provides the SES with some administration support, the service, which consists of nearly 7000 volunteers based in 342 groups across Queensland, remains unpaid. The Rural Fire Service, which performs the role of first responders at disaster events to evaluate what is required on the ground, is also a predominantly volunteer organisation. There are 34,000 firefighting volunteers and approximately 1500 rural fire brigades across Queensland.

Queensland is a vast state and its communities rely on these volunteers for disaster management preparedness and response. It is a model that has served the state well, even if there have been challenges with attracting and retaining volunteers — although Queensland is not alone in this regard. There has been much research conducted into this problem, with the five major challenges in attracting, supporting and retaining emergency management volunteers identified as being: time, training, cost, recognition and the commitment of

volunteer people. An additional problem is the fact that many volunteers are ageing, and young volunteers use volunteering as a pathway to paid employment, so they remain in their roles only for short periods of time.

It is no surprise to learn that bureaucracy and culture also pose an additional challenge or barrier to recruiting volunteers. In Community Safety, for example, employees must fulfil separate criteria to volunteer for the different agencies. Bureaucracy can be seen as putting up barriers, rather than promoting the volunteering process. National and international evidence points to the fact that programs that demonstrate success in volunteer recruitment focus on removing barriers by providing flexible approaches to volunteering, providing the right tools to do the right job, making training flexible and covering out-of-pocket expenses.

A success story: Spontaneous volunteering in response to Brisbane's floods

In response to the Brisbane floods, the wider community was desperate to help those in need. And, because there was advanced warning in Brisbane, people began to help others before the floods arrived. The community's desire to provide assistance, however, was even more evident after the waters subsided and individuals and businesses wanted to know what they could do to help victims of the flood. The Brisbane City Council, through its Facebook site, issued a call to action on the weekends of 15–16 January and 22–23 January. The council established four volunteer coordination centres in Brisbane and volunteers at these centres were then transported by council buses to their allocated sectors.

Volunteers were asked to bring a bucket, spade, boots, sunscreen and hat. Gumboots sold out in Brisbane on the first day of the call to action and 23,000 volunteers were registered at those four centres. The response was so overwhelming that some people were turned away. I know people that drove from the Gold Coast with their bucket, spade and boots only to be told there was no more room. In addition to those who attended and registered at the coordination centres, there were also many other people who were volunteering informally. These informal engagements were often facilitated through social media.

The Brisbane City Council believes that, as a result of its call to action, between 50,000 and 60,000 people volunteered across the weekend of January 15–16 and a significant number again on the following weekend. This overwhelming community response and volunteering effort has never been experienced before. So, how did it happen and what opportunities does it present? Firstly,

social media and crisis communication played a significant role in information dissemination during and after the flood crisis. Social media provided the most up-to-date information from and to the community and enabled contact between government, family and friends; it mobilised entire communities into what would be dubbed the 'mud army'. The worldwide level of interest and support created an emotional response.

One positive aftermath of the Queensland floods, and indeed of the series of natural disasters that have struck Australia in recent summers, is that there is now a platform in place to quickly mobilise volunteer disaster response teams. In Queensland, as in the rest of the country, when the disaster management framework is triggered, the police may take over the primary response role; ultimately, though, it is a multi-layered response. Local government is at the heart of this, because local knowledge is critical to successfully preparing for and responding to a natural disaster.

Consequently, when a disaster occurs, the local government works in collaboration with the Commonwealth and defence — all of which played a significant role in the response to the 2011 Queensland floods. In addition to the three tiers of government, volunteer organisations work collaboratively and across jurisdictions; Victoria and New South Wales sent both paid officers and volunteers to Queensland to help with the floods, a favour returned by Queensland when Victoria experienced floods of its own later in 2011.

How did the Queensland government use social media and what opportunities do we have to use it in the future? The Queensland Police Service (QPS) used Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for the first time during the floods, with effective results in disseminating accurate information and debunking myths, such as the need to stockpile food. This helped to restore calm and order when — particularly in shopping centres — people were beginning to panic. The QPS Facebook page had 39 million hits during the floods and became a reference point for all crisis-related information through its photos, live streaming and video media conferences, many of which were conducted jointly with Premier Anna Bligh. The Facebook page received its highest level of traffic on 10 January 2011 during a video address from the premier and the police commissioner.

Additionally, a Queensland Floods iPhone application was developed by the QPS, which had successful results. Given the urgency of the situation, the application was developed quickly and outside the QPS's normal approval process. The application allowed the QPS to transmit up-to-date information to the public about which areas to avoid, where to evacuate from, and other related messages and it is likely that its implementation avoided further loss of life.

Will there be future opportunities for social media to be used to mobilise volunteers? Most certainly. In fact, this is something on which Community Safety is currently working. The benefits of social media are obvious: it is free and available 24/7; it offers instant access to information; it uses collaboration or 'crowd sourcing' to ensure the information is up-to-date (taking into account the inaccuracy of some information) and it is regarded as a legitimate source of information. It can be accessed without power (most of Queensland didn't have power for a significant period of time during the floods) and it can build community support for people willing to receive and respond to messages.

Social media complements, rather than replaces, the traditional media, as is clear from traditional broadcast media's use of social media to supplement their own research.

Having said that, I think it is clear that there will always be a need for more traditional volunteers in disaster zones. Such people make a commitment to join an organisation and, in order to carry out their tasks, must undergo specific training. This costs money: \$4000 per person, according to our calculations. While traditional volunteers will remain the backbone of Queensland's disaster management force, it is critical, however, to take advantage of the opportunities that social media, in particular, presents in increasing the numbers of traditional volunteers and supplementing them with spontaneous volunteers like the 'mud army'. The 'mud army', as Gerry Stoker (Chapter 2) would say, is evidence that sometimes all that people need to become engaged in their community is a nudge.