

# Lessons from Norwegian Emergency Authorities' Use of Social Media

Social media has evolved along with expectations that organizations, including public authorities, would create more dialogue with citizens. This policy brief argues for, first, the importance for public authorities to listen to, follow up on and use social media users' responses and viewpoints to facilitate dialogue and organizational learning, and, second, the need to more systematically reflect on the causes, meaning, and consequences of the informal tone that some public authorities have come to use in social media.

## Brief Points

- Some public authorities use social media as a push-channel for their own messages rather than to engage in a dialogue.
- Yet, it is important for organizations to use social media for listening, to understand emerging issues, and to create organizational learning.
- In addition, social media has become an outlet for informal communication, emotion-charged messages and humour.
- When public authorities change their official language and voice, they also make changes to their identity and to public servant-ship.
- There is a risk that authorities make themselves popular on grounds other than the performance of their primary duties.

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## Mapping the Norwegian risk communication environment

A key characteristic of social media is its possibility of two-way communication between a plurality of users. However, several investigations show that few organizations engage in dialogue, and that the focus is rather on using social media, and particularly Twitter, as a push-channel for the organization's own messages. Simultaneously, some key public authorities no longer use only an official language style in the public, and social media has become an outlet for informal posts including humour.

Before we go on to discuss how social media may be used for dialogue and questions that an informal language style raises, we will map the national risk communication context in which two selected studies were done. We will provide an overview of Norwegian public actors at the national, regional and local levels that are responsible for risk and crisis management and communication. Our studies have so far focused on national and regional levels.

In the case of a national crisis situation, the prime minister consults with the Government Emergency Management Council (GEMC) and appoints a lead ministry. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security has a particular responsibility in a national crisis situation and is the lead ministry unless another has been decided. The Government Emergency Support Unit (GESU) is tasked with providing risk and crisis management support in normal situations to all ministries, and administrative support to the lead ministry and department in emergency situations.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security oversees a number of key safety and security directorates: The Norwegian Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB), The National Police Directorate, the Security Police Service (PST), and two Joint Rescue Coordination Centres (JRCC). Among these, DSB has the widest ranging tasks in that it promotes risk and crisis management prevention from national, to regional and local levels, and also provides support and advice to the Government and Ministries in questions of national crisis management. These responsibilities include carrying out supervision, analyses, and organizing risk/crisis management exercises, as well as civil defence management. Other ministries are responsible for risk and crisis

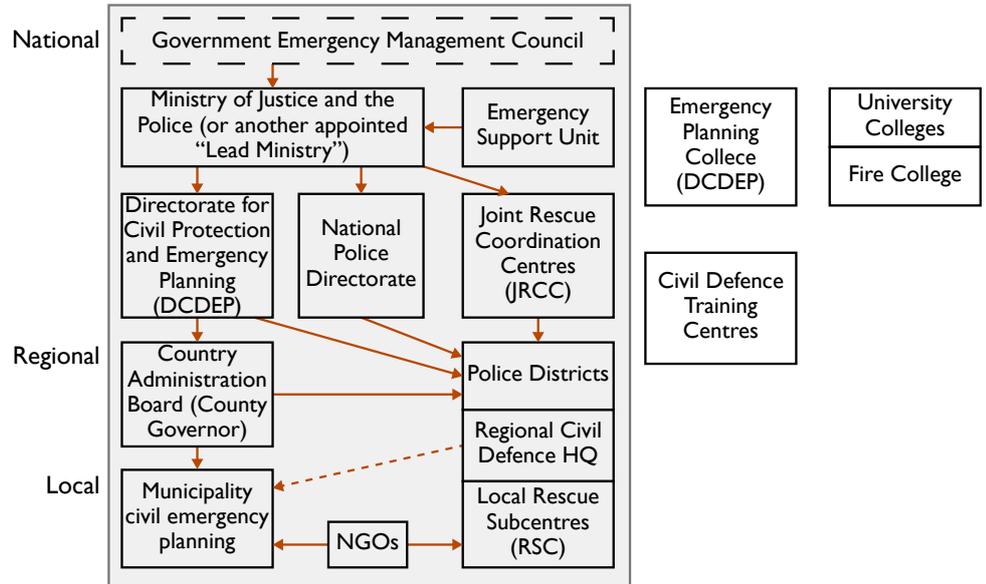


Figure 1. A model of the public risk and crisis communication actors in Norway (European Commission, 2014).

management in their area. For example, the Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM) monitors data security and sorts under the Ministry of Defence; the Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (NVE) maintains national power supplies and risks and sorts under the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy.

At the regional level, Norway consists of 19 counties each administered by a people's elected council and a Governor. They are tasked with overseeing and coordinating civil protection within their region. There are 20 civil defence districts and regional inspectorates for inspection and control of e.g. electrical safety, also under the DSB umbrella. There are additionally 27 police districts overseen by the National Police Directorate.

At the local level, each of Norway's 428 municipalities has to maintain a fire department – which is its main resource for managing emergencies – and provide health and social services, local infrastructure, care for the elderly, and risk and crisis information to citizens. Municipalities are moreover responsible for risk assessments and for local crisis management planning. Under the two national rescue coordination centres, there are 54 local rescue subcentres that perform search and rescue (SAR) operations.

For some of the organizations above, communication with the public is no longer possible solely through traditional media such as NRK, but many use social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and are thus dependent on the solutions, performance and robustness that private companies based in the United States supply. This is a contrast to pre-Web 2.0 times.

## Listening and dialoguing on social media

A variety of studies have shown that it is important for organizations to apply a receptive, listening attitude on social media (Veil, Buehner, & Palenchar, 2011). Through listening and dialoguing, it is possible to identify issues at an early stage, act in a timely manner, and thus prevent the spreading of rumours and growing dissatisfaction among stakeholders. If such a dialogue is established in normal situations, the escalation of some issues can be prevented, and it is more likely that good relations can be maintained also throughout a crisis situation.

One of the studies of our project (Rasmussen, 2015) set out to delineate salient themes that Twitter users emphasized in connection with the Norwegian terror alert in July 2014. We suggest that these themes are points that Norwegian emergency authorities can learn from. One concern that Twitter users raised was the Norwegian authorities' terror alert communica-

tion. This communication was vital given that a terror alert requires that a threat is conveyed and interpreted as real. At the same time, research on antiterrorism discourse has stated that such discourse is often vague and abstract. Indeed, vagueness characterized parts of the authorities' communication in this Norwegian case, with statements about a "possible terror threat" that is "concrete but non-specific" (Bjørnland, 2014). One category of tweets attested that this vagueness produced uncertainty and fear, and they articulated more or less bluntly negative judgement of the authorities' communication in this regard. A sports journalist's message was retweeted the most in the whole sample, producing a satirical effect when it emphasized the incongruity between expectations on crisis communication and what occurred:

*"We do not know who is threatening us, what they threaten or completely when we are in danger. Nor do we know what we should do. Let's warn. #terrorthreat"*  
(24 July 2014).

In this case, listening to social media users helps us to understand that communication that is vague contributes to further interactions that display insecurity and blaming. Furthermore, when describing a threat to the public it is not suitable to use professional jargon – which was the case with the formulation concrete but non-specific – because, although it may be crystal clear to military and police staff, it will not make sense to lay people.

A second theme that Twitter users emphasized was the Norwegian authorities' advice to the public to be watchful and vigilant so that they would help detect potential terrorism risks. Already on 24 July, Twitter users offered resistance to this attempted role of peer surveillance:

*"How should today's press conference about the terrorist threat be interpreted? Should every one of us take over the role of watcher? #terrorthreat"* (24 July 2014).

Other Twitter users used humorous exaggerations that portray ordinary people as unfit for such security work. A story released by the newspaper VG on 25 July added fuel to the

critique. The story was about an airplane passenger who had been reported as suspicious to the police by a fellow passenger because of his skin color and tattoos. Twitter users drew on this story and continued the criticism of peer surveillance.

This leads us to third point, namely responses on Twitter that profess attitudes regarding ethnicity and blame. There was a category of tweets that endorsed attitudes supporting police use of racial profiling:

*"Norwegians must stop complaining about everything #thepolice does! If they check foreigners extra carefully during #terrorthreat is that faulty as well?! #idiot"*  
(29 July 2014).

However, there were more tweets calling on readers to adopt a critical attitude to ethnic stereotyping and blaming:

*"Scary how the terrorist threat gives all racists whetted appetite. Radical forces are creepy, whatever origin. #terrorthreat #mylittle-country"* (25 July 2014).

This shows that the theme of terrorism raises concerns about the multicultural society and immigration, and also a concern that minorities are exposed to discrimination and racism. The Norwegian emergency authorities can learn from the presence of this theme on social media, and act proactively. We suggest they should, even more clearly than previously, explain their position regarding terrorism risks and ethnicity, and particularly the police should explain and justify some of their working methods to avoid the spreading of rumours.

#### Uses of an informal tone on social media among emergency preparedness authorities

Traditionally, emergency preparedness authorities have used formal communication in public, but with the more widespread use of social media, informal posts – including emotive content and humour – have become increasingly popular. Since language and tone helps to shape the identity of an organization, i.e. what

characterizes and distinguishes it, the move towards an informal tone is a critical change. We wondered how the responsible communication professionals who work for emergency preparedness authorities relate to these new social media practices. How does their organization's use of an informal tone on social media shape their view of their own organization and, therefore, the organization's identity? To explore issues of risk communication, and the increasingly popular use of an informal tone, fourteen interviews were conducted with communications professionals.

#### The frequency and type of informal communications

The interview material could usefully be interpreted along four dimensions that factor into organizational identity construction. A first dimension refers to the frequency of the use of informal communication on social media. On the one hand, the organizations which used an informal tone could present themselves as versatile, tough and fun, and not only as traditional, serious bureaucracies. The informal tone was a discursive strategy that enabled employees to reclaim a more authentic organizational identity and self, because a relaxed tone is indeed seen as part of everyday life at work. On the other hand, if an informal tone is used often on social media, as one respondent from the Oslo Police district described, the organization is perceived as having acted "out of character" and gone beyond its true identity. A second dimension concerns the type of informal tone used. The interviewees reported about uses of informal communication that ranged from, what we term, innocent to bold. Self-irony may be characterized as innocent. But ridicule is bold and face threatening. When PST tweeted "welcome to twitter @CIA. better late than never" they

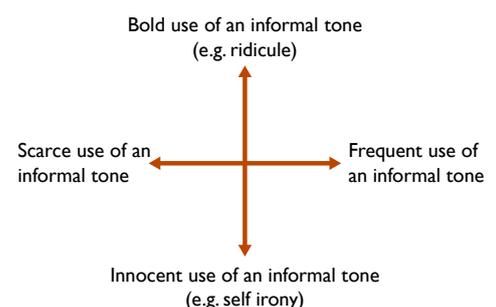


Figure 2. Frequency and type of informal communication.

used somewhat bold humour which presented themselves as up to date and competitive – having been on Twitter for several years – while the world renowned CIA was new to Twitter and the one on the receiving end of the fun.

The Oslo Police Operation Centre’s use of humour was described as having changed over the recent years from, what we have termed, bold to innocent. The use of humour on Twitter had led to a higher degree of organizational control, through culture management initiatives. Thus, the degree and type of organizational control is a third dimension that affects the use of humour and factors into organizational identity formation.

### Control and diversity

Organizational control of the use of social media always involves some form of discursive restriction. It may be that the organization wants to present a consistent identity and therefore uses rules for social media use and implements controls towards uniformity, but other organizations may implement a low degree of controls and a high degree of employee discretion or, alternatively, “just be yourself” management which encourages diversity and individual expression within certain limits. These different degrees and types of organizational control have major implications for the use of an informal tone and the presentation of the organization’s identity.

A final dimension concerns the number of employees who have access to and may use the organization’s social media accounts. The respondents’ organizations were very different in this regard. The National Police Directorate, which is to support 27 police districts, all of which are on Twitter now, has a complex and difficult task at hand. The Oslo Police District, with a dozen operators who can communicate on the operations centre’s Twitter account around the clock,

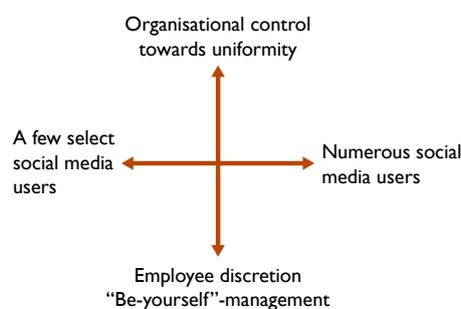


Figure 3. The degree and form of organizational control, and the number of social media users.

is also tasked with a complex communications job. Many communicators allow for many interactions, but it may also imply many voices with varying identity effects for the organization. For representatives of other, smaller organizations, for instance PST and the National Security Authority (NSM), the work with the organization’s social media accounts was designated for a select few. The conditions for managing and controlling these organizations’ presence on social media are therefore substantially different.

Central to consider is how appropriate it is that public authorities - and especially those with a monopoly on the use of force – create popularity around themselves using informal communication, humour, and updates that show a more casual side of themselves.

However refreshing it may feel with authorities that do not appear old-fashioned and stuffy, it might be risky, democratically speaking, that authorities make themselves popular on grounds other than the performance of their primary duties. The border between relationship building and propaganda is subtle. One reason to more clearly distinguish between professional and civil identity is that an organization like the police is to serve and protect the people, and in this task they have more powers and responsibilities than ordinary citizens, and

they therefore stand in a different relationship to citizens than citizens do among themselves. The police’s display of an informal tone – humour, emotions and a more casual identity – risks affecting their nonpartisan and detached bureaucratic ethos. ■

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### THE PROJECT

DIGICOM studies digitalisation in order to better grasp how new forms of risk communication affect societal security. It explores risk communication in different environments, such as authorities, news media and social media, as well as in relation to specific types of risk events that are of relevance for preparedness in Norway and beyond.

### PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.