

**Apoorva Chauhan**  
Utah State University  
apoorva.chauhan@aggiemail.usu.edu

**Amanda Lee Hughes**  
Utah State University  
amanda.hughes@usu.edu

## OVERVIEW

We examine how fire and police departments used online media during the 2012 Hurricane Sandy and how these media can be used to affect public trust in emergency responders during such an event. We offer nine recommendations for how emergency responders can build trust using social media.

## EVENT OF STUDY

Hurricane Sandy began as a Category 1 hurricane in the Caribbean Sea on Oct 22, 2012. The hurricane then tracked north, and made US landfall in Brigantine, NJ as a Category 2 hurricane on Oct 29, 2012. Hurricane Sandy is one of the most deadly (117 deaths) and costly (~ \$50 billion USD) hurricanes in US history.



## DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

We collected and analyzed social media data around Hurricane Sandy (Oct 25 – Nov 9, 2012). The collected data include:

1. Website: 676 sites
2. Twitter: 114 accounts, 3033 tweets
3. Facebook: 556 accounts, 4652 posts
4. Nixle: 128 accounts, 930 posts




## TRUST BUILDING RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our analysis, we developed nine recommendations for how emergency responders can build public trust through their online activity.

### 1. Supply timely and relevant information

Emergency responders demonstrated their ability to respond to the extreme circumstances surrounding Hurricane Sandy by supplying timely and relevant information.

 @EHTPolice via Twitter (11/8/12 14:26): FEMA inspectors will be going house to house in West Atlantic City and will be credentialed.

### 2. Serve as a local authority for information in your domain

Data reveals that emergency responders provided detailed information specific to the public concerns and the local circumstances of the event.



@QASheriff via Twitter (10/31/12 12:30): Grange Hall Road is closed from Route 213 to Poplar School Road, until further notice.

### 3. Cite others for information outside your domain

When information did not fall within their domain of expertise, fire and police departments would often cite others.



Rescue Fire Company via Facebook (10/26/2012 15:29): Are you ready for Hurricane Sandy? Prepare NOW. This site offers some great Hurricane preparedness tips: [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)

### 4. Report your ongoing response efforts

Often fire and police departments sent messages that described their response efforts. Such messages demonstrated how these departments were responding to the incident as well as provided documentation of the efforts and actions taken.



New York Police Department via Facebook (10/31/2012 14:00) - NYPD Aviation and SCUBA officers rescued five adults and one child from rooftops on Staten Island Tuesday after residents were trapped in their homes during Hurricane Sandy. (More videos via <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=UUFJ9vqyUPRkyUvnGSB-56Q>)

### 5. Make yourself publically visible online

By having a social media account or a website, fire and police departments have become more visible to members of the public than they were before such tools existed. This increased visibility makes departments more open to public scrutiny, appreciation and/or criticism.



Citizen via Facebook (11/4/2014): I never realized just what it is that you all do in times of crisis until I saw firsthand while working out of the firehouse. Allenhurst is lucky to have you and that you are all VOLUNTEERS. As I looked around and saw the amount of people you were feeding, keeping warm, providing electric and pumping out And all on little or no sleep and while you have problems of your own I was humbled. Thank you for making me feel at home.

### 6. Correct rumor and misinformation

Fire and police departments also demonstrated integrity by assuring that available information was accurate and correcting rumor and misinformation.




South River Police Department via Facebook (10/31/2012 12:39): **\*\*WATER SHUTOFF RUMOR\*\***  
There is no truth to the rumor that has been circulating about water service being shutoff. There are no plans to shutoff water service anywhere in South River. In addition, there are no problems with our water supply in South River. It is SAFE TO CONSUME AND USE.

### 7. Respond to requests from the public

By responding to public inquiry in a timely and sensitive way, fire and police departments show that they care about the community and will respond when needed.

Citizen via Facebook (10/27/2012 6:40) - What happens to the people who can't afford a hotel and has dogs and kids!? We have to stay here I guess. Hotels should offer help



 Wildwood, NJ Police via Facebook (10/27/2012 9:38) - The local police departments will have extra units that will stay behind. So if you can't afford a hotel they will make sure that nobody will be left in a bad situation. If you feel concerned please call the wildwood police station's "Non Emergency" number and they will tell you what to do. Stay safe and god bless

### 8. Invoke a sense of community with the public

Fire and police departments often send messages that call forth a sense of solidarity and community, and in so doing they build trust.



@FreeholdFire via Twitter (10/30/12 7:11) - Out of power? You're not alone. Approx 95% of Freehold has no power due to winds blowing power/cable lines & telephone poles over! #Sandy

### 9. Adapt official procedures to address public needs

Fire and police departments built trust through their willingness to adapt formal procedures to address the needs of the public.



@FDNY via Twitter (Oct 30 0:23): @Bleymor @Lisar @twitter @rass Don't want NYC to rely on this as an alt to 911. But notifying dispatchers of all emergencies tweeted

## NEXT STEPS

- Develop methods and strategies for assessing the public's level of trust given the online communications of emergency responders.
- Design tools that would empower responders to systematically and continuously assess and readjust their communication strategies to improve public trust.