



Queensland Police Service

Disaster Management and Social Media - a case study

Version 1.0

Produced by the Media and Public Affairs Branch, Queensland Police Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I am pleased to present to you this case study which documents our significant and what has been described as world leading efforts in using social media for public engagement and emergency disaster responsiveness.

It has been at times a challenging path, but through good will and team work on the part of the community of Queensland, we have established what I believe to be a best practise example of the use of social media by a government department for both engaging with the public and informing frontline colleagues in times of a disaster. In recognising this, I felt it appropriate to document our experience so others could learn from and apply some of the lessons we learned.

Our social media strategy centered on public communications and community engagement issues. This was arguably during the most difficult period of natural disasters in the history of Queensland with more than 90 percent of the state disaster-declared. Through the use of social media, we were able to communicate directly to the people of Queensland which was invaluable, helping us become more effective in supporting and serving the needs of the community.

At the Queensland Police Service, we will continue to innovate with social media and other online tools. I hope you find value in this case study and I welcome your comments and feedback.

KYM CHARLTON
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS BRANCH

BACKGROUND

The Queensland Police Service (QPS) Media and Public Affairs Branch began a trial use of social media accounts Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in May 2010.

The aim was to:

- claim our social media presence
- engage in a two-way conversation between the QPS and the public
- develop an online community of followers before a disaster occurred, in light of international examples such as the Mumbai terrorist attacks where social media dominated mainstream media coverage but authorities were not able to contribute or manage it with their own social media presence.

Police Media allowed interest in its social media accounts to initially grow by word of mouth keeping growth to a steady and manageable level. This organic growth rate allowed the media team to steadily develop their social media skills and procedures. It also gave the team the time to educate and guide its online community about appropriate behaviour on its social media sites. While initial responsibility for the maintenance of these accounts fell to a few select individuals within the team, management was able to gradually introduce social media to everyday processes so that all members grew to be comfortable with uploading information and moderating the accounts.

A legislative change on 1 November 2010 resulted in the QPS becoming the lead agency in the response phase of a disaster. By this date, approximately six months after the social media trial began, the QPS had 8000 "likes" on Facebook and 1000 followers on Twitter.

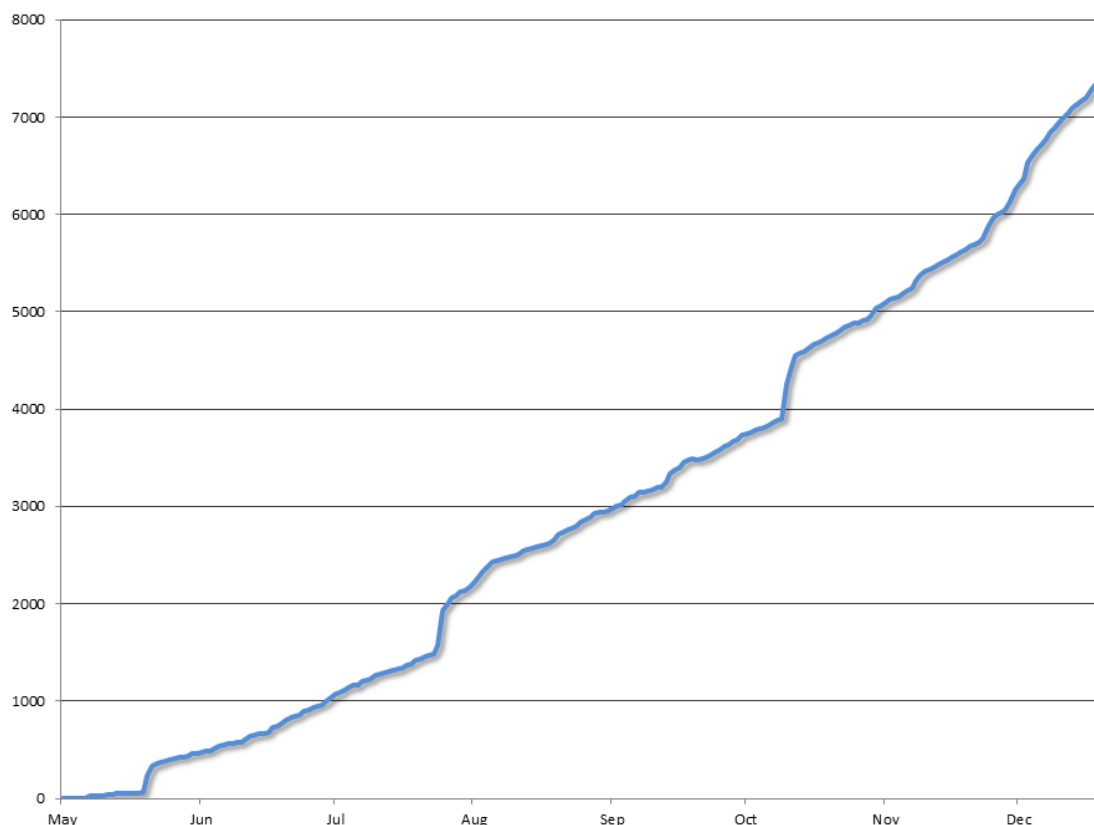


FIG. 01 – GROWTH OF QPS FACEBOOK "LIKES" FROM MAY 2010 TO DECEMBER 2010

DISASTER DECLARED

Significant rain began to fall over a large part of Queensland in mid-December 2010, and on 24 December Deputy Commissioner Ian Stewart was declared the first State Disaster Coordinator under the new legislation.

Category 1 Tropical Cyclone Tasha struck on Christmas Day, bringing heavy rain to central Queensland, resulting in significant floods.

During this time, Police Media used its established processes to deliver public safety information about the extreme weather events to the media and public. In addition to issuing regular media releases to the mainstream media and uploading these releases to the QPS website, it was also part of the general process to add these media releases to the QPS Facebook page and link to these on Twitter. This disaster contributed to the first significant spike in the number of people following the QPS social media accounts, with numbers more than doubling in two weeks.

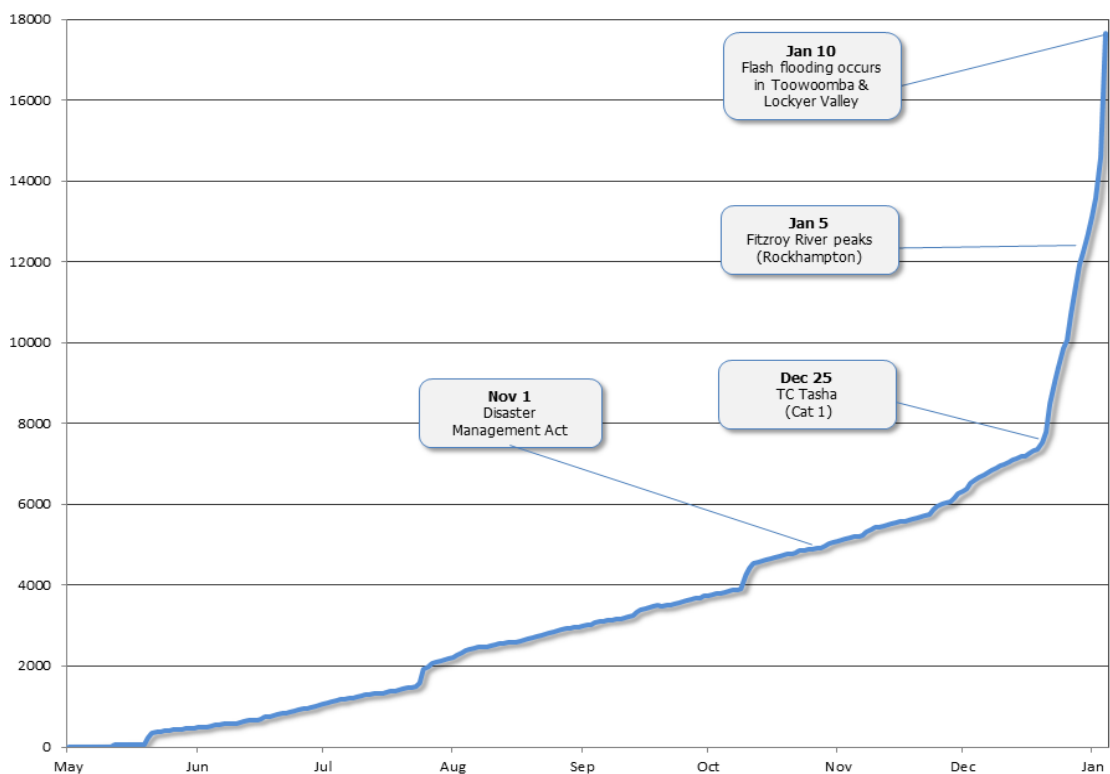


FIG. 02 - GROWTH OF QPS FACEBOOK "LIKES" FROM MAY 2010 TO JANUARY 2011

SUDDEN ESCALATION

On January 10, 2011 a flash flood described as an instant inland tsunami struck Toowoomba and the Lockyer Valley. Just days later, significant floods hit Ipswich and Brisbane. By the second week of January, 200,000 Queenslanders were flood affected and three-quarters of the state was disaster declared.

In the 24-hour period following the flash floods, the number of “likes” on the QPS Facebook page increased from approximately 17,000 to 100,000. This same day the QPS Facebook page generated 39 million post impressions, equating to 450 post views per second over the peak 24-hour period.

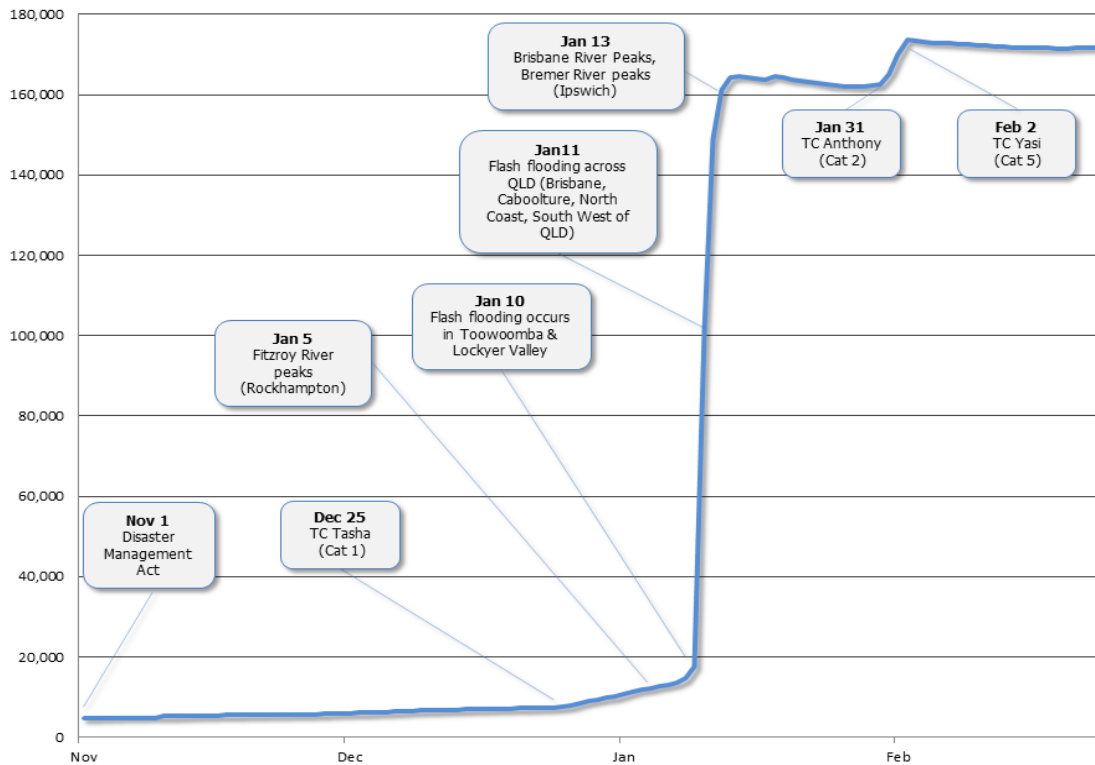


FIG. 03 - GROWTH OF QPS FACEBOOK “LIKES” FROM MAY 2010 TO FEBRUARY 2011

Within weeks of the worst of the floods subsiding, Category 1 Tropical Cyclone Anthony struck north Queensland followed days later by Category 5 Tropical Cyclone Yasi which caused significant widespread damage and flooding. Between November and March, there were 37 flood-related deaths in Queensland.

The twin cyclones caused another spike in use of the QPS social media accounts. Surprisingly between the floods and cyclones, the QPS only lost about 4000 “likes” on Facebook.

WHAT WERE POLICE MEDIA DOING DURING THE DISASTER?

Like similar organisations, the QPS has well-established processes for the drafting, clearance and release of information based largely, by necessity, on a reactive model. The QPS streamlined these processes during the disaster and the team organically turned to social media as the vehicle to reach the public and the media in the shortest timeframe. Given the majority of the information the QPS released was factual and in the interests of public safety it could be released immediately and without a clearance process. The team was trusted to use their judgement. If there was an issue that needed further verification or was potentially contentious then a more stringent approval process would be applied.

There was no directive or policy decision to escalate the use of social media during the disasters. The team instinctively gravitated towards the social media channels because they were clearly the fastest and best way to distribute important public safety information.

Within days, not only were the media relying on the QPS social media accounts as their key source of information but they were actively referring the public to our social media channels. QPS tweets would appear in national TV networks news tickers and would be read out by radio station announcers within moments of the media team publishing them.

This almost instant crossover from 'new media' to 'old media' allowed information published by the team to be distributed at a speed and to a sheer number of people not previously possible.

People stranded by the side of the road, or in their homes isolated by floodwaters and without electricity, people hunkered down in their bathrooms under mattresses as cyclones passed over their houses, members of the deaf communities, hearing impaired and people interstate or overseas wanting information on their loved ones could access detailed, up-to-the-moment information.

BASIC SERVICES PROVIDED BY POLICE MEDIA DURING THIS TIME WERE:

- acting as a centralised clearing house for disaster-related information through Facebook and Twitter as soon as it became available, including details on behalf of other departments and authorities
- live video streaming of the Brisbane-based disaster-related media conferences on the QPS Facebook page with the video subsequently posted on the QPS YouTube channel
- live Tweeting key points as they were made in briefings and in these media conferences
- uploading dot point summaries of the media conferences to the QPS Facebook page shortly after their conclusion
- uploading at least daily audio updates to Facebook from local disaster coordinators around the state
- 'mythbusting' of misinformation and rumours in the media and community
- Tweeting most QPS Facebook posts generally using the #qldfloods, #TCYasi or #mythbusters hashtags
- providing 24/7 moderation of the QPS social media accounts, responding to inquiries from the public where possible
- coordinating Auslan sign language interpreters to assist with most media conferences
- coordinating the translation of media conference summaries into other languages for affected tourists and relatives based internationally.

WHY DID IT WORK?

- Police Media had high-level organisational support, including from the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioners
- Social media had a champion in the Executive Director of the Media and Public Affairs Branch who championed its benefits from within the QPS Senior Executive and set the direction for the media and public affairs team
- Police Media was fortunate enough to have the benefit of a seven-month trial in which the team was able to become comfortable with its use and imbed it as part of its daily processes prior to a disaster occurring
- Through circumstances Police Media was able to quickly prove the worth of social media during two major disasters.

PRAISE FROM GOVERNMENT

"The Queensland Police are world leaders now in the use of social media in disasters."

– Queensland Information Commissioner, Julie Kinross in an interview with Madonna King on 612 ABC Brisbane (February 26, 2011)

THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DISASTER

- It is immediate and allowed Police Media to proactively push out large volumes of information to large numbers of people ensuring there was no vacuum of official information
- The QPS Facebook page became the trusted, authoritative hub for the dissemination of information and facts for the community and media
- Large amounts of specific information could be directed straight to communities without them having to rely on mainstream media coverage to access relevant details
- The QPS quickly killed rumour and misreporting before it became "fact" in the mainstream media, mainly through the #mythbuster hashtag
- It provides access to immediate feedback and information from the public at scenes
- The mainstream media embraced it and found it to be a valuable and immediate source of information
- It provided situational awareness for QPS members in disaster-affected locations who otherwise had no means of communications.

PRAISE FROM FACEBOOK

Melissa Thomas fantastic effort. A real example for the rest of us on how to ensure timely, accurate information to all.

Chris Robin Thank you QPS. You have made me feel like I'm part of the team with your up to date information. I really do feel like we are 'friends'. I have recommended this site to everyone as it provides the true story as it happens. Keep it up and thank you friend.

Ingrid Emanuel Good work. In this type of disaster situation the public need to be kept informed, you communicated virtually minute by minute. Thank you. ♥

Cate Deans Smith So often the hardest thing in an emergency is getting prompt and effective communications ... you guys have shown that you really "get" how to do things in the easiest way possible. I am sure some people still missed out, with electricity d

<http://www.facebook.com/QueenslandPolice/posts/191117530899692>

LESSONS LEARNT

- If you are not doing social media, do it now. If you wait until its needed, it will be too late
- Rethink clearance processes. Trust your staff to release information
- Add a social media expert to your team. While there should be shared responsibility for uploading information and moderating social media sites, expert technical advice and trouble-shooting will be necessary from someone with an IT background
- Do not treat social media as something special or separate from normal work processes. It should be integrated as standard practice
- Do not use social media solely to push out information. Use it to receive feedback and involve your online community
- Established social media sites are free and robust which can handle volumes of traffic much larger than agency websites
- Ensure that information is accessible. A PDF is not the most accessible way to deliver information. Machine-readable information such as geocoding allows the information to be more accessible and usable for others.

CONTACTS

<http://www.facebook.com/QueenslandPolice>

<http://twitter.com/QPSmedia>

<http://www.youtube.com/QueenslandPolice>

<http://www.livestream.com/queenslandpolice>

digitalmedia@police.qld.gov.au

PRAISE FROM MEDIA

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