Disaster Fundraising via Social Media: A Case Study of Non-resident Nepalese Community in Australia

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Abstract: - This study explores the role of social media for fundraising by people in a foreign country, in the aftermath of the Nepal earthquake in 2015. The Nepalese community in Victoria (and other parts of Australia) geared up almost instantly through Facebook to disseminate critical information and coordinate relief fundraising. Within two days of the earthquake, nearly 7000 people joined the Facebook page 'Victorians Stand Together for Nepal'. Content analysis of the Facebook page reveals that social media can be successfully used to drive fundraising in a disaster situation, particularly in geographically distributed populations. The page inspired thousands of people in Australia to donate over half a million dollars. Regular emotional pictorial posts on the page encouraged donations and a social network effect was evident. It was found that the Facebook page's focus on transparency, engagement, acknowledgement, encouragement and motivation were vital elements to the steady fundraising efforts.

1 Introduction

On April 25, 2015, an earthquake with a magnitude of nearly 8Mw struck Nepal. It was a disastrous natural event that killed nearly 8,000 people and injured over 20,000. Thousands of homes were shattered, people were displaced on to streets and many old heritage buildings and monuments were damaged. The risk of further landslides created a lot of uncertainty in this hilly country. Travellers were stranded; airports were damaged; both road and air travel remained seriously disturbed. A lot of social chaos also followed this natural disaster further adding to the total economic loss. People living in the upper slopes of the hilly country were badly hit in terms of receiving even minimal help. Rainfall and aftershocks made matters worse. The availability of safe drinking water, medical aid, makeshift tents, disposable toilets and emergency volunteers was a major problem. This was a tragedy of immense proportions and a response from all corners of the world was needed.

Disasters get more consideration from far-off people who feel affected by the situation, or are attached to the region or affected individuals [1]. The Nepalese community in Victoria (and other parts of Australia) are good examples of these far-off people who were affected by the situation in one form or another. They geared up almost instantly through Facebook to disseminate critical information and coordinate relief fundraising, with the main aim of raising funds to assist those affected by the earthquake. The Facebook page 'Victorians Stand Together for Nepal' had 6783 people join it within two days [2]. Through the efforts of this group, medicines, blankets, tents and non-perishable food were collected and shipped to Nepal. Social media gave people (who are away from their home countries and others) an opportunity to pitch in to the relief efforts from thousands of miles away. This effectively invigorated the Nepalese community in Australia to contribute via micro-volunteerism. Social media plays an important role in the post-event disaster phase, with an emphasis of raising and developing awareness of the event, facilitating and collecting donations [3].

Natural disasters have affected mankind since times immemorial but the disaster relief strategy is what makes this one different. The massive use of social media is the main point of difference now, whether it is to alert people of well-being during a disaster, or crowd-funding, or relief coordination efforts, social media has come to the rescue. Social media has helped to change the coordination of disaster relief efforts and it will only strengthen going forward. The billions of connected smartphones, computers and other mobile devices have clubbed together to create a different kind of reality that is cosmopolitan, global, peer to peer, real time, interactive and totally unstructured. Now grass root responses get as much or more media attraction than conventional media. The scale and viral nature of social media posts can make them critically important during disasters. Their instant nature makes them viral and effective.

Prior research has highlighted the role of social media for fundraising and relief efforts but none that particularly focusses on fundraising where the donors are geographically apart from the disaster zone. This study serves to expand the knowledge base regarding how social media can be used to drive fundraising, particularly in geographically distributed populations. It surveys the posts made on the Facebook page 'Victorians Stand Together for Nepal', with an aim of exploring some vital elements that may have led people, in this case the Non-resident Nepalese community in Victoria, Australia, to donate in a crisis situation and the role Facebook played in mobilising fund-raising. Most previous studies are built upon on-site efforts but this is an off-site case where people from Australia helped those affected in Nepal.

Brief background literature is presented in the next section. This is followed by the research method section. Then, the findings along with the discussion are outlined. Finally, a conclusion is presented with limitations and avenues for further research.

2 Literature Review

Media plays an important role in getting humanitarian messages out to people during disasters and also to tap into donors to raise funds [1]. This notion holds true for both traditional media and social media. Social media can be defined as "collaborative online applications and technologies for the creation, sharing and application of information by facilitating a social environment amongst users" [4], pg. xvii. Huang et al [5], in a study of Taiwan typhoon disaster relief, built the logic of irreversible integration of social media tools into an emergency response system. Saxton & Wang [6] underline the new methods for non-profit organisations in the context of social media tools. Such methods use a network effect that escalates web-reach out capacity of an organisation unlike that of traditional methods where physical capacities matter much more. In crisis situations, social media plays a vital role in rescue operations, fundraising, sharing information and fundraising [7]. Pantti [8] focussed on user-created disaster videos as a method of raising funds for victims. The interactive participatory feature and viral possibility of YouTube videos can reach millions in a few hours.

Social media takes its impact to an entirely new level by capitalising upon scale and reach of different social media platforms. It is used to disseminate emergency information which focusses on hazards, fundraising, volunteering and general wellbeing of affected people [9]. Bennett & Kottasz [10] interviewed 200 people and concluded that media representation of victims, self-help images and emotional appeals play a motivating role in peoples' donation decisions and if the agency seeking relief is a collaborative and organised one, it adds to the credibility of the emotional appeal. Starbird & Palen [11] identify a new category of digital volunteerism that results from self-organising skills offered by the new socio-technical environment vis-à-vis social media applications like Twitter and the self-organising skills of volunteers can lead to improved assistance in disaster-situations. Post-disaster coverage on traditional and social media leads to a upward spike in charitable giving, with Facebook and Twitter influencing and informing donors to make well-informed donation decisions [12].

Non-profit organisations use social media in times of disaster to publicise and encourage the general public towards voluntary actions, such as giving and volunteering [13]. Disaster relief fundraising should focus on emotional appeals and perspective taking can be an important predictor of international giving, particularly for the donor to feel compassion for a disaster-affected person in a foreign country [14].

Social media fundraising allows reaching out to geographically distributed people globally, inspires peer-to-peer donations and creates a social network effect that encourages donations [6]. Facebook is an important platform to increase donations and interactivity with page members should be considered [15]. In a Japanese study, it was found that social media was an effective tool in non-profit fundraising and had a positive impact on the amount

of donations raised [13]. However, there has been no prior research that has looked at the role of social media fundraising, particularly in geographically distributed populations, who are very distant from the disaster.

3 Research Method

This research used a single case study approach as such disaster events are rare and limited to single occurrences [16]. The case study method is useful when evaluating a phenomenon that is not clear or inadequately theorised [17]. A single case study design is also considered appropriate when the case represents an unusual scenario and is representative of a particular situation [18]. Content analysis, using Facebook posts as a data source, is a common approach used by researchers [19]. Analysis of this raw data from Facebook posts can lead to meaningful findings. The objective is to typically analyse textual data, with an aim of interpretive sense making. Krippendorff [20] defines content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 24). With a view to better understand the power of social media for fundraising by people who are thousands of kilometres away from the disaster zone, this study adopts a qualitative content analysis method but is based on an exploratory interpretive approach. Qualitative analysis enables researchers to uncover meaning without the dominance of quantitative analysis [21]. However, the findings are often descriptive in qualitative studies but there is no definite truth [22].

Social media driven emergency relief operations can be of various types and can fill a wide variety of gaps left open in traditional hierarchical relief operations. For the purpose of exploring humanitarian fundraising efforts through the use of social media, the focus of this paper was to locate the narrative on the Facebook page 'Victorians Stand Together for Nepal', which was created in the context of the Nepal earthquake. All Facebook posts over a two month period i.e. from 26 April to 26 July 2015 were manually analysed to explore abstract ideas.

4 Findings and Discussion

The Facebook page 'Victorians Stand Together for Nepal' was created on 26 April 2015 by the Non-Resident Nepali Association Australia (NRNAA), one day after tragedy struck. The purpose of the page was to help in expediting the process for rescue and relief operations for people affected by the earthquake in Nepal. On the first day of the creation of this page, over a dozen posts were made that set the tone of the humanitarian aid and emergency relief work, with the main focus of fundraising. Among the first posts was bank accounts information for depositing funds in Victoria (Australia) as well as the beneficiary account in Nepal. A list of contacts of coordinators was published that dealt with separate issues of fund raising, coordination of medical and non-medical volunteers, supplies collection, media personnel and general enquiries. The first lot of relief material, such as blankets, was shipped right on the first day of page creation, and photos were posted on the page. This ensured transparency and encouraged others to contribute too. This demonstrates that disclosing organisational information creates a sense of transparency with social media members [15]. Volunteer forms were uploaded seeking expressions of interest from people willing to go to Nepal to help with on-ground rescue and relief operations. This is congruous with the fact that social media can be used to identify and list ways to help or volunteer [3].

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) were uploaded so people looking for answers to common questions found them easily, without the need of any repetition from the page administrators. Photos of collected relief material were posted immediately. The immediacy of posting information is similar to that accomplished by the page administrators of various community-initiated Facebook groups during the 2010/2011 Queensland and Victorian floods, who also published near-real time information [9]. Media reports, particularly of television and radio channels, was shared on the page. Emotional encouragement was provided in almost every post, so people could come forward to support the relief effort.

The first day's posts happened regularly. This was in stark contrast to fundraising posts about Queensland, Australia floods of 2011, which only appeared on Twitter towards the latter days of the crisis and social media was not used to significantly promote fundraising schemes either [23]. However, the immediate call to raise funds was unprecedented in the case of the Nepal earthquake. Donations started pouring in and fundraising events were organised. Many restaurants and hotels contributed by diverting customer service tips to the cause.

The collective impact of all the posts was very methodical and encouraging; it set the tone of the effectiveness of social media in the disaster relief

strategy, with an emphasis on humanitarian grounds. Within a day, the support from diverse people was quite large as a lot of clothes and blankets were received. Posts were designed to trigger, inform and encourage responses, with the sole aim of inspiring the fundraising effort. In fact, so many clothes were collected that another post was made on 27 April to stop further collections of clothes and focus on only collecting blankets, tents, sleeping bags, hydrolyte tablets, water purifiers, bandage and paracetamol. Research has shown that positive emotions based on morality can encourage relief efforts [15].

The tempo built on the first day was repeated on the second day with over two dozen posts this time. There were regular updates from ground zero of Nepal, status of volunteer coordination and fund-raising as well as media reports by a television station, a newspaper and a radio station. This is consistent with a prior study which highlighted that creating an awareness of the impact and destruction resulting from a disaster motivates other people to donate [3]. A helpful list of resources and help centres in Nepal was also published on the page, which was created by Nepal Hotline. Posts to the page were quick and there were no posts that showed a lack of responsibility or precision on the part of the page administrators.

A post with an image highlighting that AU$ 10,800 was collected was published on the second day. Posts like these encouraged others to contribute too. The page became a go-to source for all relief efforts coordinated by the Nepalese community in Victoria. People commenting on the posts provided further ideas for fund-raising such as developing a cookbook, musical shows and organising teas at workplaces. Many other large organisations also pitched in to assist. Telstra, Vodafone and Optus, all telecommunication providers in Australia, offered free calls to Nepal. This was soon followed by Western Union's announcement of waiving transfer charges for all funds moving to Nepal. Whilst these may appear to be unrelated to the page, announcements about these offers of help were spread through the Facebook page and they were helpful for people here in Australia but not necessarily in Nepal. To reach out to more people, a hashtag (#VictoriaForNepal) was also created, although it was not extensively used. The use of hashtags can provide branding, help to increase interaction [24] and should be used with every post.

Collections of supplies was halted on 29 April, with continued calls for monetary donations. Many posts with photos of how the Victorian community assisted through different fund-raising activities at their workplaces were continually shared. This constant encouragement through heart-warming posts was important to motivate others to contribute. A lot of small businesses contributed. Information on how to donate was regularly posted with invitations to attend fundraising events throughout the state. In fact, the vast majority of posts were related to fundraising, which further strengthens the core purpose for which the page was initially created. However, there was a disproportionate balance between fundraising posts and other general information posts, with more of the former over the latter.

The use of visuals in almost every post was evident. This was a good strategy to encourage the audience to pay attention to the posts, not just scroll. The photos showed communities' responsiveness and willingness to contribute to fundraising. Sharing of photos in disaster situations can be "informative, newsworthy, and therapeutic" [25], pg.1. Posts had strong emotive messages, with a call for action soliciting funds. Most others posts were focussed on acknowledging and thanking donors and supporters, which was a strategy aimed at inspiring others to give. Previous research has highlighted that timely and public acknowledgment of donors is important [26] and it can motivate more donors to contribute [27].

Table 1 shows the amount that was collected through donations, which was regularly updated on the page. This transparency and regular reporting of an up-to-date tally kept the momentum of donations steady. In the Haiti earthquake of 2010, charitable donations peaked during the first week of the event [12], a trend that was observed in this case too. This illustrates that frequent social media messages about the disaster lead to an increase in donations, both monetary and non-monetary. It appears that charitable giving was definitely motivated by regular posts about other people donating to the disaster-relief effort. This can also be described as the social network effect, where people who had liked the page shared posts with their online friends, ultimately increasing donations and other contributions [6].

Table 1: Donations collected

Dates	Amount (AU$)
27-Apr	10800
5-May	66000
10-May	80620
13-May	112157
15-May	134388
17-May	143212

22-May	176439
26-May	194563
29-May	227601
4-Jun	231196
19-Jun	252939

More than 5000kgs of donated goods were packed by volunteers. In just under a month of the page being created, NRNAA declared that they had exceeded their original target of reaching eight districts and 10,000 families or 40,000 people as they provided relief supplies for an additional 7000 families, taking the total relief distribution to 17,000 families and 68,000 individuals. After this post, there was a drastic reduction in the frequency of the posts which kept on reducing further with only occasional posts. This trend is similar to the case of Facebook and Twitter pages of non-profit organisations where the number of posts decreased after the first ten days and further gradually decreased after reaching a saturation point [15]. However, the transparency of information should have been an on-going feature as the last tally of donations collected was posted on 19 June. NRNAA continued to receive funds after 19 June too but a total's tally was not posted on the Victorians Stand Together for Nepal page. Donations were also received from other Nepalese organisations in Australia. The final total was $583758 [28]. On 1 August 2016, a year-end note to donors was posted online, along with a list of all donors and other details of funds received.

To continue the momentum for any similar relief efforts in the future, the Facebook page was renamed 'Australia Stands Together For Nepal' in 2017, indicating a shift from a localised state level to a national country-wide level. The usage of Facebook in this humanitarian emergency shows how social media can now be used to coordinate relief efforts, keep people informed, raise funds and seek help. The use of Facebook and other similar social media platforms is essentially free and does not need any permission to set up and use. This fundraising effort carried out far from Nepal by the Nepalese community in Victoria (and other parts of Australia) shines a beacon on the role of social media in bringing the community together in difficult times, with a particular focus of transparency, engagement, acknowledgement, encouragement and motivation as key elements that inspired fundraising.

5 Conclusion

This is the first study that explores humanitarian fundraising efforts that were far-flung from the disaster location; the fundraising happened in Victoria, Australia for the Nepal Earthquake. The main focus of the explored social media page remained on fundraising, not on general information and advice. Regular posts with emotional imagery on the Facebook page encouraged people to donate. Posts portraying donations made played an important role in inspiring people to contribute. This study demonstrates that giving took a social network effect and people donated as they felt connected to the cause, even from a geographically distant location. It has indicated that a self-organising social media strategy was able to maintain a sense of effectiveness and efficiency and intensified fundraising and relief efforts. These subtle findings can assist in creating and sustaining effective fundraising appeals on social media.

The limitations of a single case study approach should be taken into account before making any generalisations. The associations and findings drawn in this paper are based on interpretive sense making of the posts, rather than being mediated by the number of posts, likes and comments on the Facebook page. Future research could look at more empirical evidence by examining the number of posts and their associated likes and comments. Further studies could also look at the difference in giving for humanitarian causes or more generalised fundraising.

Nevertheless from a theoretical and practical perspective, social media, Facebook in particular, played a major role in fundraising for the disaster relief efforts in Nepal. It made appealing for help and collecting emergency relief materials for affected communities in Nepal relatively easier over traditional methods. The Nepalese community in Victoria, Australia played its role in coordinating humanitarian efforts, although located thousands of kilometres away from their home country. The steady flow of donations was possible because of the Facebook page's focus on transparency, engagement, acknowledgement, encouragement and motivation to inspire fundraising. The explored case highlighted the vital role of social media in raising awareness, inspiring people to donate and collect funds.

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