

Connecting Through Chaos: How Social Media Platforms Helped Save Lives

By Syed Shahzeb Ayaz

During catastrophes, people turn to first responders and disaster relief organizations for safety and assistance. Volunteer organizations, evacuees, local businesses, and regular people also play prominent roles in aid efforts. During Hurricane Harvey, however, a new phenomenon emerged that helped shape the reaction to the storm — social media. As of January 2020, an estimated 230 million Americans use social media, and out of those, 225.4 million are active on it via their mobile devices.¹ Throughout Harvey its multifaceted capabilities served as a medium for communication, news outlet, and safety network that demonstrated how social media has become an essential tool that should not be overlooked following this historic, yet saddening, moment.

When analyzing social media, the most logical starting point has to be the ubiquitous Facebook, with its 2.6 billion users worldwide. Although it was originally designed for college students, Facebook's influence has expanded exponentially, with hundreds of millions of users in the United States, and tens of millions in Texas.² These users include individuals, businesses, and various organizations from schools to nonprofits to neighborhood, faith, and political groups.

Facebook emerged as a platform that many storm survivors relied upon for communication, help, and information — as participants in the Resilient Houston: Documenting Hurricane Harvey project attested. Ana Vazao, a school

counselor in Houston, recalled the community spirit it fostered. “Facebook was wonderful,” she explained, adding, “they would tell you [about] resources. If you need cleaning products, go here. If you need this, go here.” Brian Cororve, an estate attorney and Meyerland resident, discussed how his community stayed connected with social media, noting “Facebook was a big resource for sharing information, and Meyerland had a Facebook group for people who flooded.”³ The platform was important to other neighborhoods as well and provided a safety check-in function so that friends and family could update one another.

Rabbi Jill Levy, director of Jewish Living and Learning at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center (JCC) during Harvey, used Facebook to organize donations and other support via her organization. She contacted JCC branches around the country via email to notify them of local needs and how to filter donations. The local JCC administration then established a Facebook page that clarified what it needed most for the donors' consideration when choosing what to bring. “Facebook just makes everything go really quickly,” Levy explained.⁴

Renee Cohen utilized Facebook a great deal when her Meyerland home flooded. Shortly before the storm, Cohen posted on Facebook, “Where could we park our cars?” in hopes of finding high ground to protect her vehicles. She



Using social media to locate those in need and dispatch volunteers to assist them, Mrs. Gitty Francis (far right), along with her volunteer staff, ran the Hurricane Harvey relief operations of Chabad-Lubavitch, a worldwide Jewish movement with a focus on outreach activities.

Photo courtesy of Chabad of Texas Archive.



When people lost their family's necessities, those who could offered relief, often matching up through social media.

Photo courtesy of Revolution Messaging, Flickr.*

learned that the administrator at her children's school had offered its elevated parking lot as a safe location, which protected Cohen's cars from Harvey. She also recalled her stressful experience at the George R. Brown Convention Center, which the city opened as a shelter. Concerned for her family's safety, she posted on Facebook, "We're at George R. Brown, can anyone come to get us?" A friend responded, picked up the Cohens, and brought them to her home. Despite the storm's unpleasant circumstances, Cohen was overwhelmingly positive about the support received from her community via social media. She recalled, "I had put up a picture on Facebook of the baby's changing table on the front lawn with all the garbage and within minutes someone sent a message" saying they had one for her. Facebook helped guide people through the preparation, experience, and aftermath of Harvey, and showed Cohen the depth of support that community members had for one another.⁵

Although Facebook ranked as the most active platform

by the Resilient Houston interviewees who discussed social media, other social media platforms were equally important to those who used them. Mrs. Chiena Lazaroff, head of the school where Cohen parked her car, created a WhatsApp group to get the word out about access to the parking lot. Similarly, Secunda Joseph and Brandi Holmes, community organizers affiliated with Black Lives Matter-Houston and Project Curate, a nonprofit group dedicated to issues of intersectionality, inequality, and injustice, spoke about their experience using the voice and video chat app, Discord. As posts emerged on the app, it became evident people in certain zip codes were underserved, and the app enabled Joseph, Holmes, and others to find folks who needed assistance. Joseph extolled the impact of social media upon their organizing efforts, saying, "That social media piece and that Discord app and just people who were engaged all over — and with texts and everything else, that saved people's lives."⁶

In Katy, University of Houston student Jane Wong recorded her evacuation experience on Snapchat, a mobile app and service for sharing photos, videos, and messages. A group of volunteers evacuated Wong and her family out of their home; she vividly remembers the view through her doorway — a torrent of water where her street should have been. A friend of Wong's saw her Snapchat video and recognized the man who was evacuating Jane as the same man who rescued her the day before, part of a group of volunteers from Dallas that had answered the call for help and worked their way through the neighborhood.

Following Hurricane Harvey, recovery efforts flourished through social media. After his vehicle flooded, Irving Rothman, z"l, an English professor at the University of Houston, traveled by Uber, a multinational ride-hailing company offering services that include peer-to-peer ride-sharing, food delivery, and a micro-mobility system with electric bikes and scooters. Rothman used Uber consistently to get to work and other places; he described the experience



Jane Wong used Snapchat to video men from Dallas who conducted rescues in her Katy neighborhood where every home flooded.

Photo courtesy of Jane Wong.



Irving Rothman, z"l, was an active congregant of Beth Yeshurun, a synagogue in Meyerland which received over six feet of water.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

as convenient, and he appreciated the app's economic value. "From September to December, the cost of Uber for me was about \$1,300 [\$325 per month]. Over a year that would add up to about \$3,900, which is still less than buying a new car, doing repairs. Tires alone on a new car cost about \$1,200."⁷

Amy Zachmeyer and the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) raised funds for hurricane relief through YouCaring, a now-defunct American crowdfunding website that allowed users to raise money for charitable causes.

Zachmeyer was surprised and thrilled the page drew a large amount of traffic, exclaiming, "All of the sudden, we [had] \$120,000." On the advice of a colleague in Oklahoma, DSA initially handed out gift cards so people could get whatever they needed instead of providing the typical water and canned foods. Zachmeyer also mentioned the use of GoogleForms as another online tool that augmented their efforts to distribute aid.⁸

Any dive into social media would be remiss without mentioning Twitter, which has become an essential platform for online discourse for everyone, from kids to the President of the United States. The Kinder Institute for Urban Research, a Rice University-based "think-and-do tank," conducted a study that suggests Twitter can be a valuable resource for rescuers and officials who are trying to organize a disaster response.⁹ Though Twitter may not present an accurate demographic picture, the real-time nature of the tweets is a useful augmentation to other sources of data that allow rescuers and administrators to pinpoint regions that are bucking a trend or need immediate help.

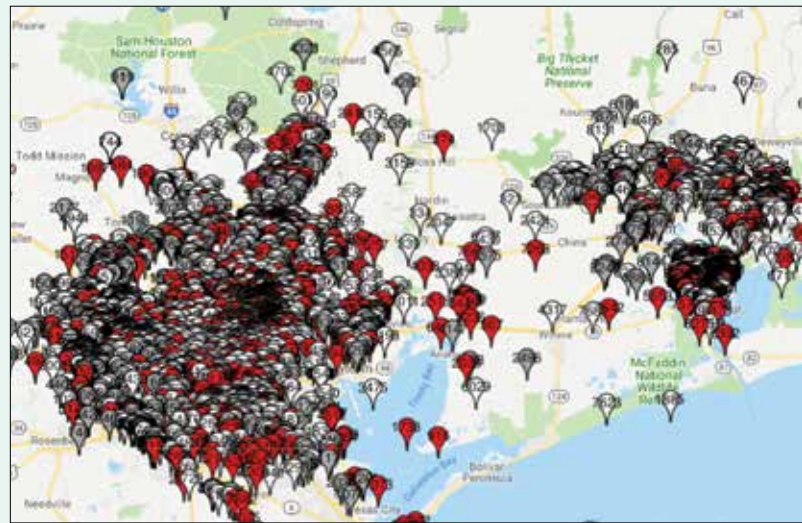
As mentioned, Twitter, like all social media, is not a one-to-one demographic match with the general population. Many different groups, particularly those for whom English is not their first language, use other apps more heavily, especially apps that allow free international calling to stay in touch with friends and family abroad. WhatsApp is a free texting and calling replacement with over one billion users worldwide, with many of them in Latin America, Africa, India, or Europe. WhatsApp helped the Houston Desi Friends, an Indian American WhatsApp group, to mobilize and deliver food to Harvey victims. WeChat is another app, similar in function to WhatsApp, which also boasts more than a billion users, and is popular both in China (where it is based) and among the Chinese immigrant community in the United States. The Chinese American community, spearheaded by the Chinese Consulate in Houston, used WeChat to organize rescues, salvage property, and combat misinfor-

mation during Harvey.¹⁰

Hurricane Harvey was the first major storm to hit Texas in the age of social media. The social media phenomenon illustrates a stark contrast in the reaction to Harvey and the reaction to past storms. Facebook was first pitched to the general public in 2006, two years before Hurricane Ike hit Houston. At the time Facebook was still in its relative infancy and could not yet support widespread relief efforts. As the development of Facebook and other social media progressed, the number of Americans using those platforms increased significantly and across many demographics. This led to a massive increase in the sophistication of support networks and communication.

Social media is not, however, furnished exclusively by large corporations. Social media developers Matthew Marchetti and Nate Larson developed an app called CrowdSource Rescue to connect people who need help with local volunteers who could provide it. During Harvey, the app helped coordinate the rescues of roughly 25,000 people.¹¹ CrowdSource Rescue's efforts did not stop with Hurricane Harvey. Since then, the developers have been actively tailoring the app to facilitate support during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Harvey was one of the first experiments combining disas-



CrowdSource Rescue helped mobilize over 8,000 volunteer rescuers within a matter of hours after Hurricane Harvey. Not only did this reduce the strain on overburdened 9-1-1 services but the data is also being used to improve the response to future disasters.

Photo courtesy of CrowdSource Rescue.

ter with social media, but it almost certainly will not be the last. Social media has profoundly and irreversibly changed the way that we react to disasters and other events affecting society. Thanks to its ubiquity, its accessibility, and its lightning-fast response time, the use of social media will likely continue to be of critical importance in future storms.

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