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Weathering the Storm Surge of Social Media

By Melody Bowdon
UCF Forum columnist

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I've lived in Central Florida for more than 15 years, and in that time I've seen quite a few serious weather events affect our community. Though the hurricane season starts in the summer, around here we tend to become especially aware of the storm possibilities in the early fall, when more tropical activity spins up in the ocean and when annual milestones that have been marred by big storms in previous years come up on our calendars.

Discussions about previous and possible future storms find their way into many of our social interactions, both in person and online. Recent transplants to the area are regaled with stories about long-term residents' first or worst storm experiences (but simultaneously assured that big storms rarely impact the Orlando area).

I grew up in tornado-prone Oklahoma, and many of my friends and family still live there. Every year when the springtime tornado-alert season comes, I find myself paying special attention to my Twitter and Facebook accounts, keeping a wary eye on posts by prolific friends to find out what's happening back home. In 2013, when a series of major storms hit the Oklahoma City area where my family lives, I followed closely the Twitter stream of reports by local citizens who provided details about funnel sightings, property damage, power outages, deaths and terrible injuries, accidents, and more in the area at a much more rapid rate than national media.

I'm not alone in counting on social media for information about news and weather, but sometimes it can be a disappointing source. A couple of years ago I worked with a team

of research assistants from UCF on a project analyzing the Hurricane Sandy-related tweets posted by several organizations we would likely turn to in an emergency situation, including a high-profile nonprofit organization that focuses on disaster relief, a major international news outlet, and a government agency.

When my team and I conducted our analysis, we discovered that many of the tweets posted by groups that should likely be committed to offering useful, helpful and timely information for people in a crisis failed to meet that objective. They were instead aimed primarily at self-promotion—for example, they listed the number of individuals they'd housed that night instead of providing concrete details about where people in need could go for shelter, offered recaps of weather events that had already ended rather than forecasting the immediate outlook, or suggested long-term planning strategies for disasters instead of offering on-the-spot survival strategies.

Most of these tweets would have almost no value to a person evacuating, seeking shelter, or worrying about loved ones in harm's way. And what we learned from that study made me think a lot about social media more generally.

Every few days we see a post about the do's and don'ts of social media—something like the five worst Facebook friends or the 11 most obnoxious kinds of Twitter posts. We see articles about why social media is depressing us, isolating us, wrecking our self-esteem, costing us current and future jobs. Celebrities and politicians are forever getting into trouble when they apparently fail to stop and think before posting something controversial, rude, private, or proprietary, and plenty of them who might otherwise escape our notice become infamous overnight by documenting their bad judgment in 140 or fewer characters.

A classic category of posts likely to cause the harms suggested in formal studies and anecdotal blogs is referred to in the Urban Dictionary as the humblebrag (a self-criticism that masks self-promotion, e.g., *"If I don't stop eating like this I'll be a size 4 before you know it!"* or *"Being the most gifted in class is really hard on Junior"*). These kinds of posts wrap pride in humility, inviting complex reactions from readers.

When my research team and I were analyzing the Hurricane Sandy posts, we looked at the profiles of the organizations whose posts we were studying and we compared their purported positions and values to what their feeds seemed to suggest about them. In all cases we found a disconnect between the ways in which these groups described their goals and objectives and the images they presented in their social-media presence.

When many in their audiences were facing life-threatening storms, these groups were bragging on their own accomplishments.

All of us who use social media need to think carefully about the ways in which we represent ourselves: Think carefully about what we share on social media and hold our news agencies, our professional organizations, and our contacts to high standards in this regard, particularly when we are posting in professional circles.

This kind of strategy can help us keep the storms our readers are enduring from becoming even more difficult.

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