

# **IAEM Column**

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### **Disinformation Control will Replace Rumor Control**

One of the mainstays of the activated Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is the Public Information Officer (PIO) function. Many times the PIO is stationed in what is called the Joint Information Center (JIC). I have found most of these JICs to just be ICs (information centers) with nothing being “joint” about them—but, then that is a topic for another day.

Just about everyone wants to know what the future holds and in the rest of this column I'll tell you about one aspect of responding to disasters that is coming rapidly towards you and our profession.

Let me start with saying that when serving in the military as an infantry officer I had the title “Operations Officer” for 10 of the 20 years I served. I had a great deal of time serving in EOCs and Tactical Operations Centers (TOCs) during multiple tours of duty in military settings that included battalion, brigade, division, corps and army level TOCs. We had Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) around back then and, truth be told, I would not give them the time of day. My success had nothing to do with what they were doing.

When I transitioned to the civilian world and emergency management, I began to understand the role of the PIO as it related to an activated EOC. My realization was that no matter how well my organization performed, if the story wasn't told it just might be that all our good efforts would be considered a failure. Thus, the PIO and the JIC became my best friends and a place I put considerable effort into during the disaster preparedness phase of being ready to respond.

One role of the PIO function in an activated EOC is what we have called rumor control. Disasters can be chaotic events and mainstream media in the maelstrom of events and little information could get the facts wrong. PIOs were assigned the mission of watching local news casts to capture any incorrect information being relayed and then others would contact the media outlet to give them the most current and correct information.

Enter the social media world we live in today and the task of rumor control has gotten even more difficult and assumed a more prominent and meaningful role. Now you have the chance for incorrect information to be transmitted to thousands of people and then relayed to tens of thousands more people in a Nano Second. The mission remains the same, counter the incorrect information with good information and use all your own governmental/organizational social media accounts to get the word out.

I had an “ah ha” recently. I see it applying to just about all segments of our society and has likely progressed beyond the political level already. This being deliberate disinformation. While the Russians were serious “implementors” for years, other nations

and nefarious parties, both left and right, commercial and governmental will jump into the fray. There is nothing to keep disinformation from becoming a tactic used during a disaster. Rather than someone interpreting the facts incorrectly, they may be spewing their own “alternative facts” as truth.

We are in this “post truth” age and thus are more susceptible to disinformation campaigns against individuals, agencies, companies, and products. With a lack of trust in institutions it will be hard to counter these types of campaigns that are meant to sow a lack of respect and acceptance for “official” sources of information. We can see those types of activities in the area of climate change already—even from the highest levels of government. Why would they do this? Because they can!

In our world of emergency management, we have always worked to address “rumor control” to counter stories that seem to happen organically and naturally in disaster situations when information is scarce, and people are hungry for anything that “seems credible” The rumor mill can grind and grind with all sorts of stories being circulated. With no doublechecking of information and with social media in full bloom information on any hot topic spreads rapidly. To use an old quote, "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes."

All of the above, means we will require a much closer alliance with PIO/PAOs who manage information and now to take a security perspective concerning the information coming at them. Security will expand beyond the physical and cyber to the public information management aspect for what messages are being shared, directly and indirectly. The issue with disinformation is that it may not be a direct assault on an organization or product, rather it can be the “long-game” attacking from the oblique to achieve a slow disintegration of trust in whatever they are targeting to disrupt. Their goal may not be immediate, it can just be a slow chipping away of organizational credibility.

I have no easy solutions for you, no silver bullet technology or tactic to counter disinformation. The best advice I have for you is “forewarned is forearmed.” Take time now, before the crisis to sit down with the people who provide PIO support and have a conversation about disinformation that goes beyond the normal rumors. This is not some far off threat, it is real and it is at our gates now.

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