

# Digital Dependency: Information-Seeking Habits of Millennials in Distress

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**Abstract.** Advances in technology have dramatically changed the ways individuals interact with one another in emergency situations. While past generations relied on limited media resources, information provided by neighbors, and their own observations when deciding how to react to widespread emergencies, the millennial generation has grown up in a world of crowdsourced data and digital media saturation. While the volume of information at the disposal of modern tech-savvy individuals dwarfs that available during past emergencies, an over-reliance on technology may minimize the advantages of modern communication networks by decreasing utilization of local social capital. This exploratory study investigates the degree to which 18- to 25-year-old college students, a cohort representative of the new digital generation, utilize technology to access information during emergency situations. A series of focus groups involving 17 Wichita State University students provided a baseline understanding of ways radio, television, and new media influence the communicative behaviors of the age group. Participants were asked a series of questions aimed at identifying primary and secondary sources of information during such emergencies, devoting special attention to behaviors during electricity blackouts. Analysis concluded the cohort relies heavily on digital devices and particularly smartphones for such information and that the utilization of face-to-face social capital was not highly valued in most situations familiar to participants. The study concludes that the cohort was heavily dependent on new media for information when making decisions on how to react to emergency situations and recommends further investigation into the ways in which social capital is utilized digitally as localized communication networks migrate onto the Internet.

## 1. Introduction

It is well documented in both governmental and academic research that those affected by emergencies seek out information differently today than in the past. As individuals become increasingly reliant on digital information in their day-to-day activities, they also turn to such resources in times of need, sometimes abandoning previous networks of social capital in favor of handheld media resources. A 2009 White House study stated American citizens rely heavily on new media for information during emergencies, despite the fact that such systems are particularly vulnerable to failure during such events (White House, 2009). Studies conducted in 2004 found that strategies used in the past by emergency managers to pass information to the public require improvement to meet the demands of populations affected by future emergencies (Becker, 2004).

This study seeks to better understand the degree to which the technically advanced millennial generation, which came to consciousness in an already digitized world, relies on digital information during emergencies. Through a series of focus groups it attempts to answer the following research question: What resources do 18- to 25-year-olds utilize when looking for information during emergency situations? In doing so, the study opens the door to future substantial research on the topic of digital dependency in emergency situations and the ways in which social capital is utilized digitally.

## 2. Method

During the Fall 2012 semester, a convenience sample of 17 Wichita State University students between the ages of 18- and 25-years-old was assembled and divided into three focus groups. Students were offered extra credit in a basic communication course in exchange for their participation. Focus groups were held in which participants were asked to discuss the following questions: 1) When you feel threatened by an emergency, where do you first turn for information; 2) When your first resource is unavailable, where do you turn next, and so on; 3) Have you ever been in an emergency situation in which the power was out? If so, how did you access information during the emergency? If not, where would you turn for information in such a situation; 4) What kind of information would you look for if the power was out and you were looking for emergency information; 5) Do you feel you would have adequate access to emergency information if the power went out; 6) Have you ever considered how you would act in an emergency situation, regardless of whether or not you have been in one in the past; 7) Do you think it is important to have access to energy-independent devices with which you can access information, in case an emergency involving a power outage occurs? If you don't already have such devices, do you have any plans to buy one or more in the future?

Focus group proceedings were recorded and later transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed to identify common communicative behaviors within the for potential investigation in future studies.

### **3. Findings**

Comments made by focus group participants suggest 18- to 25-year-olds rely heavily on new media for information during emergencies. All 17 participants said they owned mobile phones with Internet capabilities. Of those 17, 15 said their smartphones would be a primary resource for obtaining information during such events and that they would consult search engines or media outlets for information rather than utilizing personal contacts via their phones. Of those 15 participants, several said they might seek out authority figures in person for information during emergencies such as bomb threats, labeling such events as “immediate emergencies” in contrast to passive situations like impending weather threats. The remaining two participants identified parents as their primary resource for information during emergencies; smartphones were identified as a chief secondary resource. Television was often cited as a secondary resource, suggesting some traditional sources of emergency information remain important to millennials. Finally, very few participants said they had thought about how they would act in an emergency situation or taken time to prepare for potential future emergencies. Those who had done so cited hypothetical threats against their personal safety, such as being robbed at the workplace or abducted from the side of the road, rather than widespread emergency events.

### **4. Discussion**

As might be expected from an exploratory study, the most valuable data gleaned from this study relates to the potential for further research. Participant comments suggest that while millennials place a great deal of trust in online media outlets for information in emergency situations, digital social capital plays a notable role as well. While prior use of traditional, face-to-face social capital is well-documented in academic literature, little research has been done on how such networks have been digitized or the ways in which online social capital is utilized differently than traditional social capital (Murphy, 2007). Additionally, the findings of this research would benefit from the addition of information obtained from sources that have experienced a catastrophic emergency situation such as Hurricane Sandy of 2012 or the Joplin tornado of 2011.

### **References**

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