***Wary of the Web: The Underutilization of Web Sites for Public Outreach***
***by State Emergency Management Agencies.***
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We are in the era of the "citizen journalist" where anyone with a smart phone, an Internet connection or a Twitter account can spread his or her version of the truth to the entire world.

For emergency managers, this new technology brings both opportunities and challenges. In many ways, they face the same challenges that confront today's marketers – getting their messages heard in an increasingly crowded marketplace of ideas.

Last year, my research assistant and I conducted a content analysis of the emergency management agency Web sites of all the states and the District of Columbia. We catalogued each site to determine what we have called its content-richness.

Additionally, we invited the 51 public information officers to answer a short questionnaire. Twenty-three PIOs – 45 percent – responded, an exceptionally good response rate for an online survey.

For this paper, we looked at four specific research questions:

**Question 1 – Who do these PIOs see as the primary targets of their Web sites? Does the content reflect their priorities?**

These Web sites are, for the most part, untargeted. Nearly nine out of 10 respondents said their Web sites were targeted toward, for lack of a more descriptive term, "all comers." However, training information geared toward local government emergency managers was the most-frequent feature of these sites.

The PIOs also said they tend to believe that the news media have a better understanding of their agency's mission than do state legislators or the public. In a post-Katrina environment, the belief that the public does not understand the mission of these agencies is troubling.

**Question 2 –What factors influence Web site content-richness?**

In what may seem an obvious conclusion, the people who design and maintain these Web sites appear to have the greatest influence on their content richness. However, only one-third of Web sites were designed and maintained by the agency PIO.

Web sites administered under a state government mandated template appeared to be more content-rich than those designed in-house – suggesting that emergency management agencies lag behind other government agencies in Web expertise.

**Question 3 – To what degree are online newsrooms and PIOs accessible?**

Less than half of the Web sites provided the identity of the PIO, his/her direct telephone number and direct e-mail address. One out of every five sites did not identify the agency's PIO by name. This is in conflict with the value of transparency the public expects of government agencies.

**Question 4 – To what degree do these officials value the Internet?**

While the respondents see some value in the Internet, they do not see it as valuable as the more traditional media with which they are more familiar.

**Closing Commentary**

There's nothing wrong with providing training calendars and internally focused information on the Web. However, this does not preclude providing a similar emphasis to other publics, such as the news media, businesses, educational institutions and the public at-large.

While traditional mass communication sources of information continue as important channels for reaching the American public, emergency managers should also consider nontraditional Internet and wireless social media. While some may express concerns about the fragility of the Internet and social media infrastructure during calamities, the fact is that all digital age communications face similar vulnerabilities.

Even with their flaws, each of the 51 Web sites we studied serves a useful purpose. It is hoped that the same can be said for this research – that its purpose was not just to criticize these officials, but help shed some light on how they can fulfill the mission to which they have dedicated themselves.

I have a handout for you – one that summarizes the findings of this paper. It also provides a URL where you can download this paper and related research.

I invite your questions and discussion.