



# PANTA RAY

*Inspiring Resilience*



## Social Media in Crisis Communications Report **2020**

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# FOREWORD

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## ALBERTO MATTIA

*Chief Executive Officer*  
PANTA RAY

The relationship between social media and crisis communications is an interesting and somehow controversial topic. While it is undeniable that social media platforms represent useful low-cost tools, their use during a crisis carries a number of risks that we must consider carefully. Nowadays, organizations cannot avoid having a social media footprint and, whether they like it or not, building a strong social media presence can make a difference during a crisis. The development of a crisis management strategy can benefit from both social media monitoring and communications, especially as many stakeholders (e.g. employees, clients, authorities) might also rely on those channels. However, many organizations are still not entirely familiar with these tools, especially during a crisis. This is why our industry needs to pave the way for rising generations of professionals who grew up with social media and better understand these platforms in all of their facets. This is an underlying theme for this report, especially as PANTA RAY

passionately supports rising generations and new ideas in the continuity and resilience ecosystem. Innovative thinking is necessary for an industry that deals with such a broad and evolving threat landscape. As always, our hope is that this research report will assist practitioners in their daily jobs, shedding light on issues that have so far been left uncovered. We truly believe in the power of insights to drive change. The goal here is to provide food-for-thought for those who currently use social media during a crisis or are planning to do so in the future. What we know for sure is that this is an under-researched topic that deserves more attention, which is why we want to start a conversation around it with this report. Finally, on behalf of the whole PANTA RAY team, I would like to express our deepest gratitude to the authors of this report, Gianluca Riglietti, Lucila Aguada, Joe Eyerman and Kamal Muhammad, for their invaluable and extremely qualified contribution.

# Introduction

Reliable communications are an essential part of crisis management and today more than ever practitioners have a variety of solutions at their disposal. Crisis communications arrangements have gone from more traditional tools such as manual call trees to highly sophisticated emergency notification software. In recent years, however, social media have also started to play a role, as organizations often prefer them due to factors such as low costs and usability. Despite several discussions on the topic, there are no previous studies that specifically address the role of social media within crisis communications arrangements. In order to shed light on this issue, this report examines how practitioners from fields such as crisis management and business continuity use social media during disruptive events. A pilot study was presented in June 2019 at the Terrorism and Social Media Conference, receiving positive feedback from tech multinationals and intergovernmental organizations. The findings analyze the situations where social media platforms are mostly used, their costs and benefits and the role of social media providers.

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# Methodology

The study used mixed methods, collecting data both through a survey and a series of in-depth interviews. This approach allowed the authors to look at the bigger picture while also having the option to dig into specific cases.

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## Executive Summary

TOTAL RESPONDENTS



DIFFERENT COUNTRIES



DIFFERENT SECTORS



of organizations use social media to communicate or gather information during a disruptive incident

During a crisis half of the organizations use WhatsApp to communicate both with:



their staff



top management



The majority of respondents use either Twitter, Facebook or WhatsApp to gather real time information during a disruptive incident

Social media are mainly employed during:



natural disasters



public protests



terrorist incidents



The main benefits to using social media during a crisis are:



usability



the volume of information available



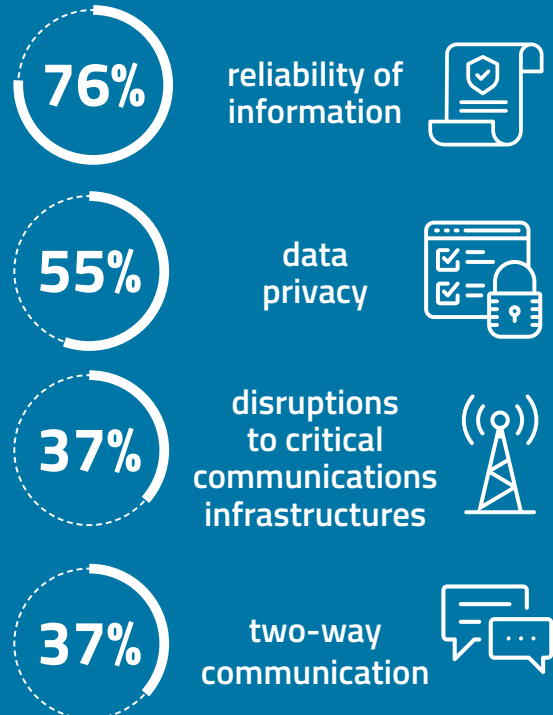
the low costs



Information gathered with social media is validated through:



Even though respondents use social media, they still have concerns regarding:



believe it is the responsibility of social media companies to guarantee reliable communications platforms



agree that they should provide dedicated communications apps, such as Facebook's safety check system



Most surprisingly,



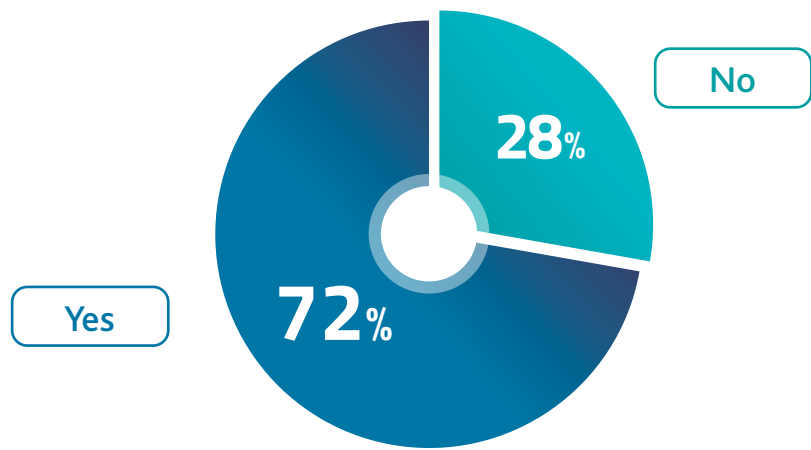
state that if social media platforms were down, their crisis communications capabilities would be seriously impaired.



The majority (72%) of organizations rely on social media to communicate or gather information during a disruptive event. Most respondents revealed during a series of in-depth interviews that they monitor a wealth of threats, including reputation damage. While most of them perform this function internally, two stated that their organizations employ a third party to take care of social media monitoring. Out of the interviewees who analyze social media, nearly two-thirds use specific software to do so, while the remaining third adopt manual monitoring.

# Social media uptake

## 1 DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE OR GATHER INFORMATION DURING A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT? N=47



	Yes	No
Large enterprise	72%	28%
Small and medium enterprise	73%	27%

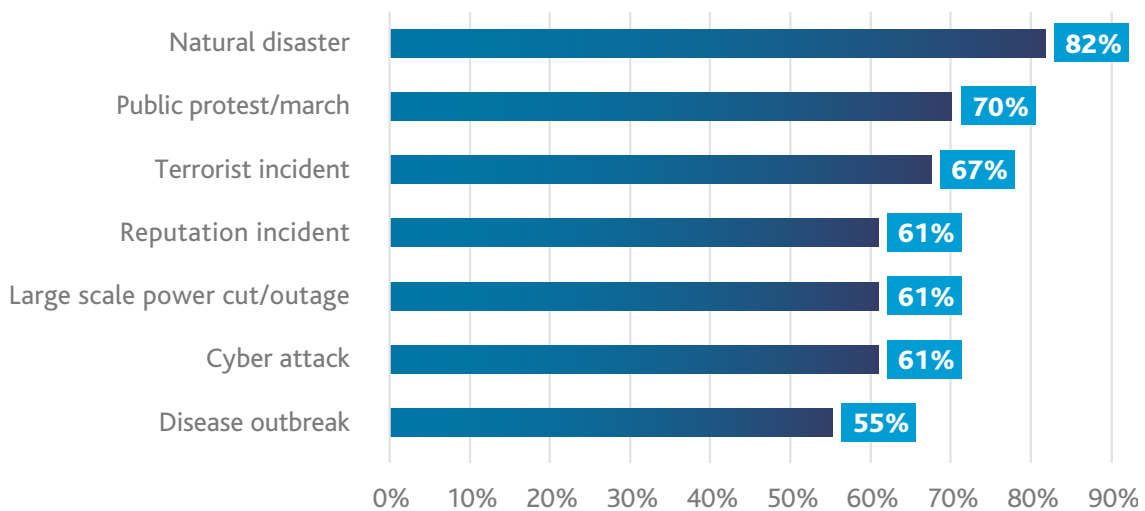
The most common disruptive incidents where organizations use social media concern natural disasters (82%), followed by public protests (70%) and terrorist incidents (67%). However, the majority of respondents also use social media to communicate and gather information during reputation incidents, power outages, cyber attacks (all at 61%) and disease outbreaks (55%). It is worth highlighting how researchers from the Institute for Security, Science and Technology (ISST) are using social media platforms to identify pandemics. By using artificial intelligence, ISST have produced an algorithm that scans Twitter for posts concerning early signs of disease outbreaks, grouping the number of users with specific symptoms and cross-referencing the information with various agencies.<sup>1</sup>



1) <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/news/180678/how-social-media-used-detect-next/>

2

IF YES, DURING WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE OR GATHER INFORMATION? TICK ALL THAT APPLY. N=33



## Social media platforms

Social media channels have a variety of applications for practitioners dealing with a disruptive incident. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or WhatsApp can be used both to collect information and to communicate with internal and external stakeholders. In terms of internal communication, practitioners mainly use WhatsApp (50%) and internally developed apps (25%) to send messages to internal staff. Similarly, over 80% of them use the same two solutions to communicate with top management (52% use WhatsApp and 32% internally developed apps). The findings in this report are echoed by other relevant industry publications, such as the BCI Emergency Communications Report, which shows how only 41% of practitioners use messaging apps that are suitable for crisis communications (BCI Emergency Communications Report 2020).

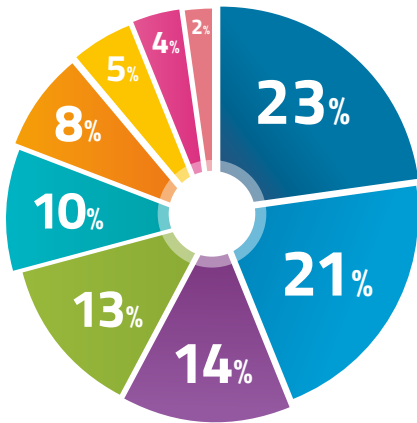
Differently, organizations rely more on platforms such as Facebook (43%) or Twitter (30%) to communicate with the public. They also use social media to gather real-time intelligence during a crisis, especially Twitter (23%), Facebook (21%) and WhatsApp (14%). A security manager based in Mexico reported how he relied on group chats with peers from other organizations to share intelligence during a Narco blockade, where highways fell under the control of local drug cartels and therefore had to be avoided. On a similar note, the Metropolitan Police of London analyze social media to spot and prevent, among others, gang violence and terrorist attacks (Metropolitan Police<sup>2</sup>). Respondents also reported using messaging apps to communicate with both internal and external stakeholders during high-profile incidents such as the 2014 Ottawa shooting and the 2017 Manchester Arena attack.

It is also worth noting that, in the in-depth interviews, respondents showed significant differences in the functions responsible for the use of social media during a crisis. These included, among others, crisis management, corporate communications, stakeholder management and operations departments.



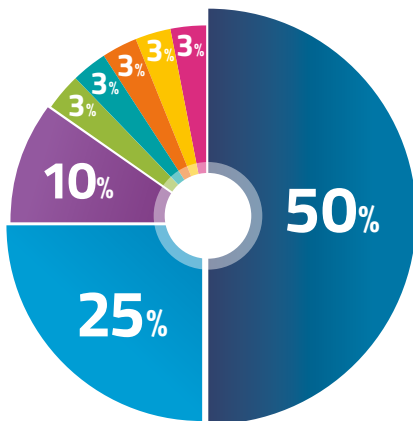
**3 IN THE CONTEXT OF A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT, WHAT DO YOU USE THE FOLLOWING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS FOR? TICK ALL THAT APPLY. N=28**

**3A. GATHERING REAL-TIME INFORMATION**



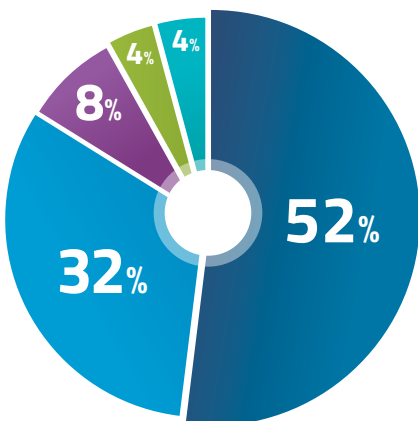
- Twitter 23%
- WhatsApp 14%
- Instagram 10%
- Telegram 5%
- Other 2%
- Facebook 21%
- LinkedIn 13%
- Internal app 8%
- WeChat 4%

**3B. COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR STAFF**



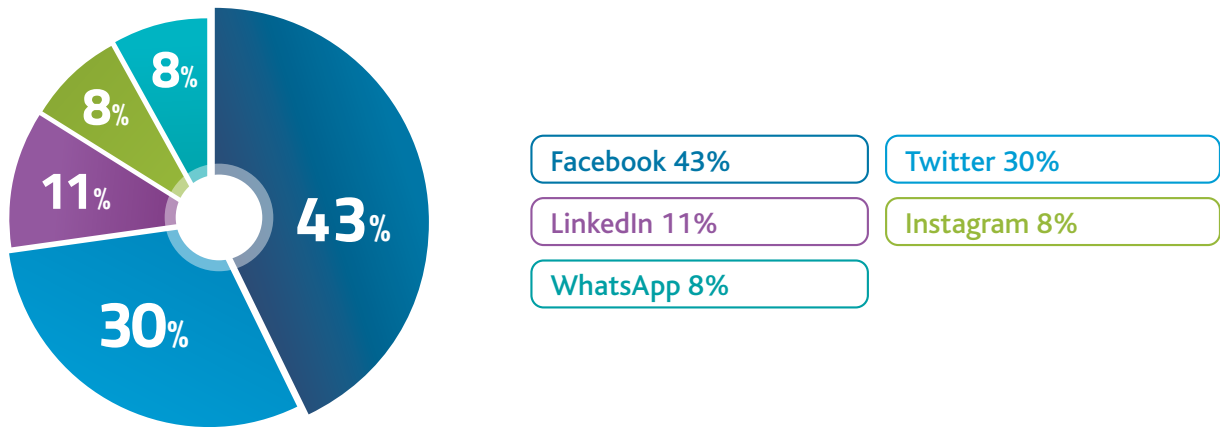
- WhatsApp 50%
- Facebook 10%
- LinkedIn 3%
- Twitter 3%
- Internal app 25%
- Instagram 3%
- Telegram 3%
- Yammer 3%

**3C. COMMUNICATING WITH TOP MANAGEMENT**



- WhatsApp 52%
- LinkedIn 8%
- Telegram 4%
- Internal app 32%
- Instagram 4%

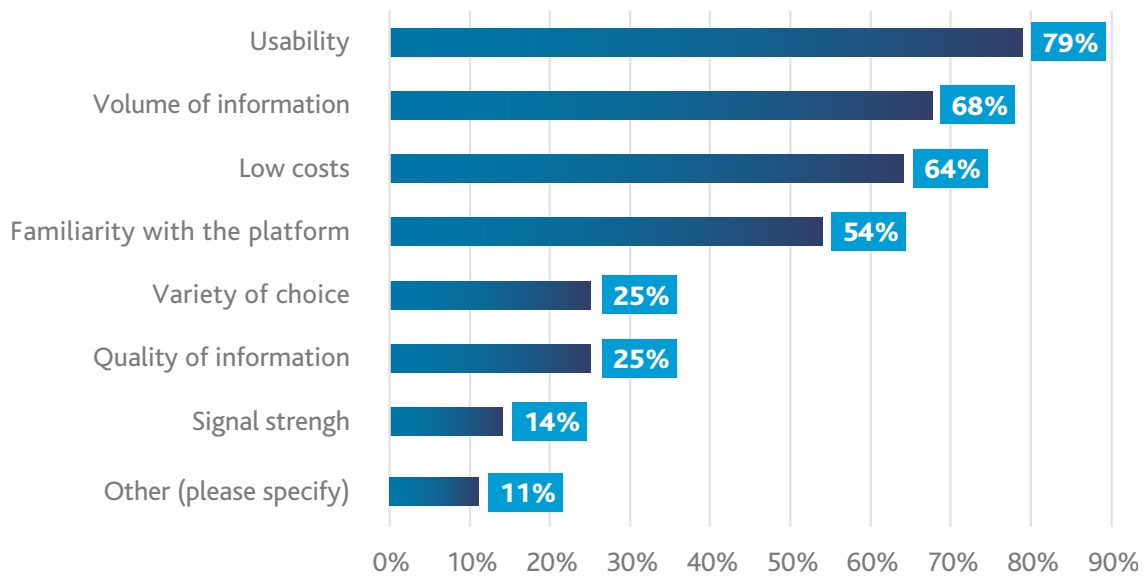
3D. COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC



## Benefits and challenges

Most practitioners (79%) prefer using social media during a crisis due to its usability. Respondents consider the volume of information (68%), low costs (64%) and familiarity with the platform (54%) further benefits that motivate their choice. This is no surprise given that, for instance, Facebook has roughly 2.5 billion active users.<sup>3</sup> However, only a quarter (25%) of the respondents think that social media provides a satisfactory variety of choice and quality of information.

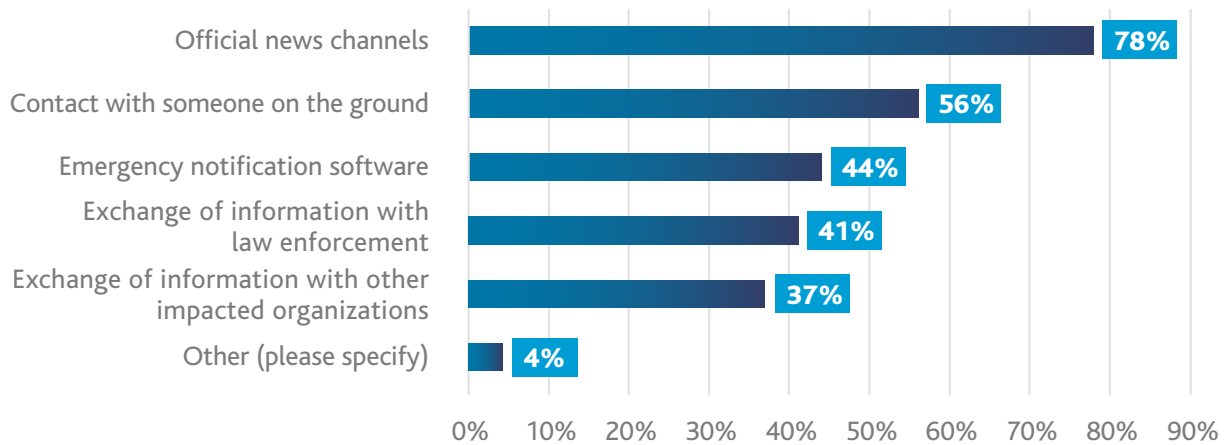
**4 WHAT ARE THE MAIN BENEFITS IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT? TICK ALL THAT APPLY. N=28**



<sup>3</sup> Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide as of 3rd quarter 2019. [Internet]. Statista. 2019 [retrieved January 2020]. Available from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/>

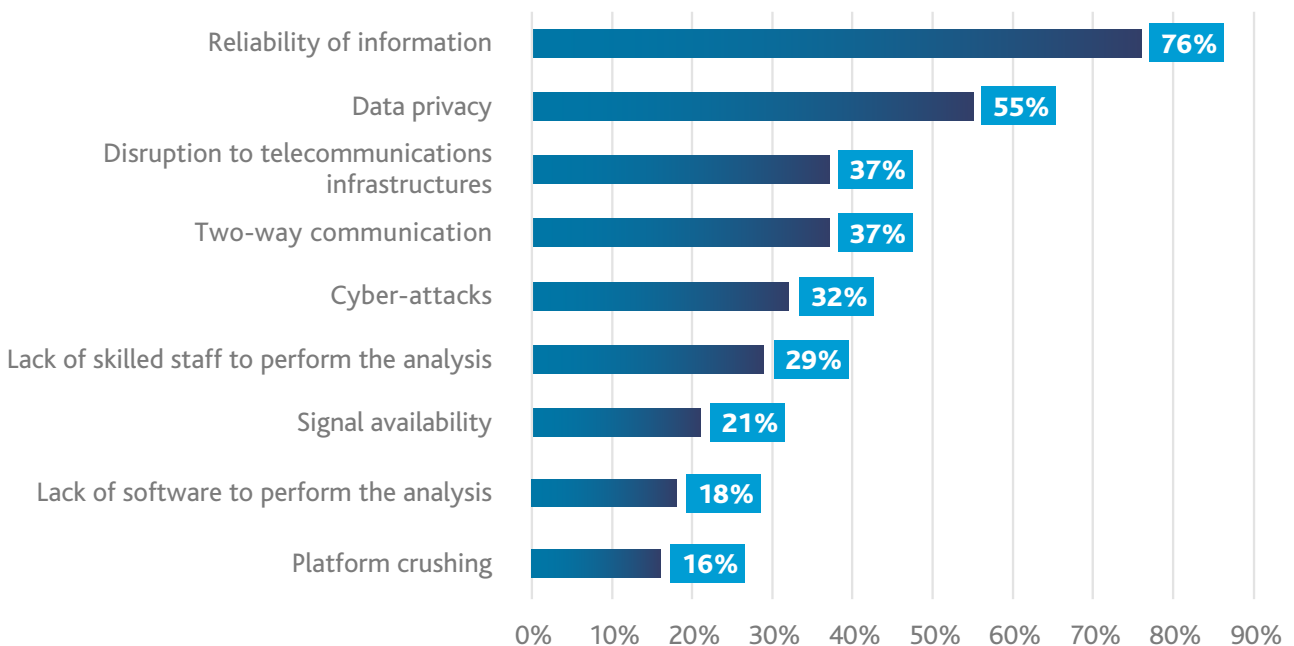
**5 IN THE CONTEXT OF A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT, HOW DO YOU VALIDATE THE INFORMATION GATHERED THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA? TICK ALL THAT APPLY. N=27**

Organizations validate the information gathered on social media through official news channels (78%), contacts on the ground (56%) and emergency notification software. The in-depth interviews revealed how certain practitioners rely on group chats with their peers from other organizations to confirm the intelligence received on social media platforms.



**6 WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN CONCERNS WITH USING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT? TICK ALL THAT APPLY. N=38**

Despite using social media in their crisis communications plans, respondents still worry about issues such as reliability of information (76%), data privacy (55%), disruption to telecommunications infrastructures (37%) and two-way communication (37%). These are legitimate concerns caused by the fact that platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook are not built with crisis management purposes at their core. Rather, practitioners make the best of them during a crisis scenario, even though they should be fully aware of the risks they are taking.



## Crisis management implications

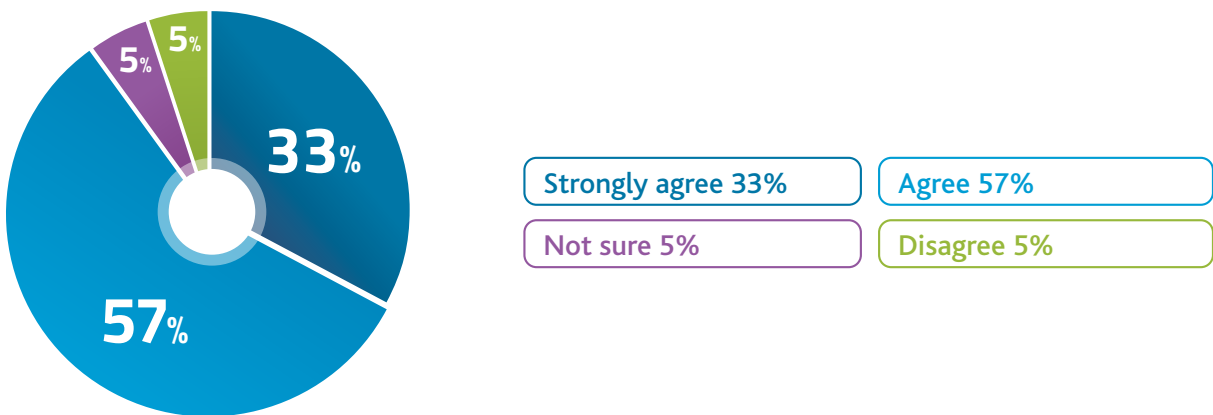
Respondents report a significant reliance on social media platforms in this section, revealing some criticalities in their crisis management arrangements. The vast majority of practitioners either agree (57%) or strongly agree (33%) with the fact that social media is useful only if combined with emergency notification software. However, they also highlight that social media companies have a responsibility in guaranteeing reliable communications during a disruptive incident (54%) and that they should provide dedicated crisis communications apps (64%). Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (64%) disagree with the statement that social media should not be used at all during disruptive incidents.

These findings show the viewpoints of experts in the organizational resilience field on the relationship between social media and crisis management, which no previous works in the existing literature have specifically addressed before. These figures also seem to reveal the need for a deeper conversation between practitioners and tech companies, as social media providers might not necessarily be aware of the extent to which their services are used to handle crises.

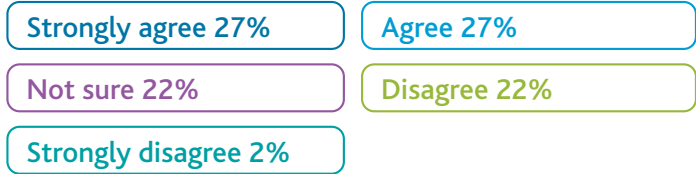
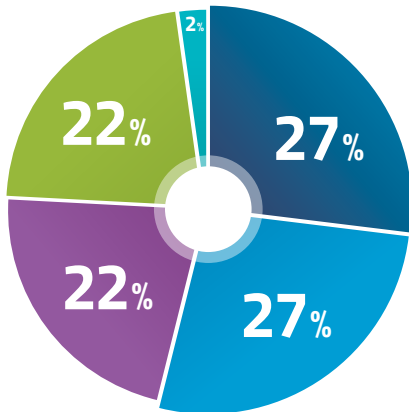
On the same note, respondents overwhelmingly agree (68%) that social media is a better tool than emergency notification software for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). In addition, in what is probably the most surprising finding of this report, nearly half of the respondents (43%) state that their crisis communications capabilities would be seriously impaired if social media were down.

### 7 TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS? N=37

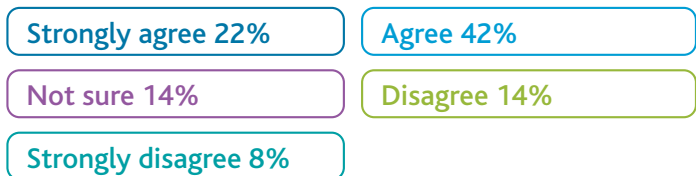
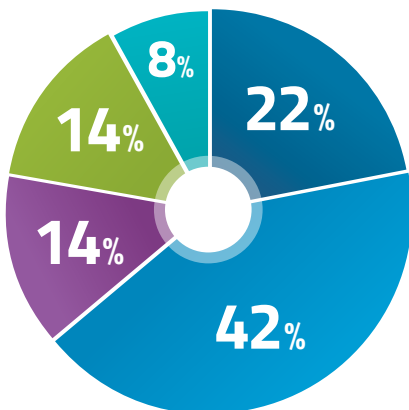
#### 7A. SOCIAL MEDIA IS USEFUL IF COMBINED WITH EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SOFTWARE



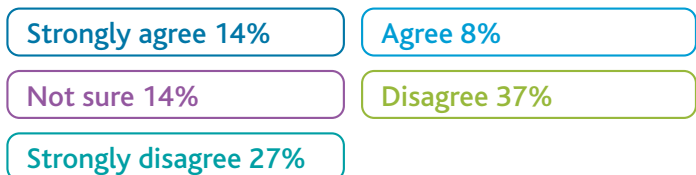
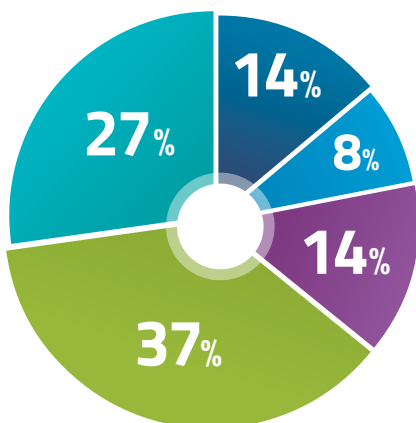
**7B. SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY IN GUARANTEEING RELIABLE COMMUNICATIONS DURING A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT**



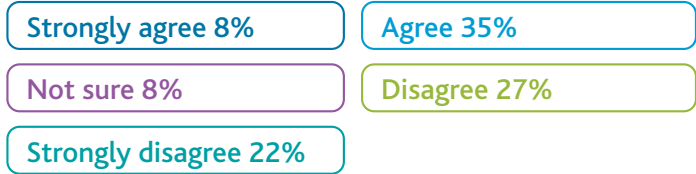
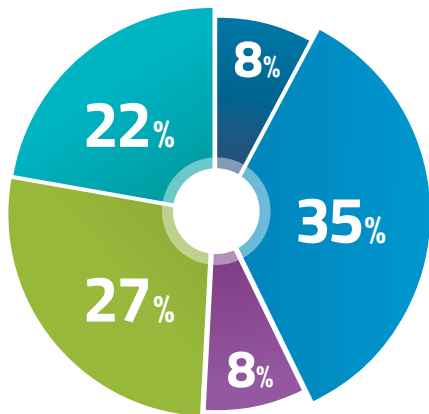
**7C. SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES SHOULD PROVIDE DEDICATED CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS APPS (E.G. FACEBOOK SAFETY CHECK)**



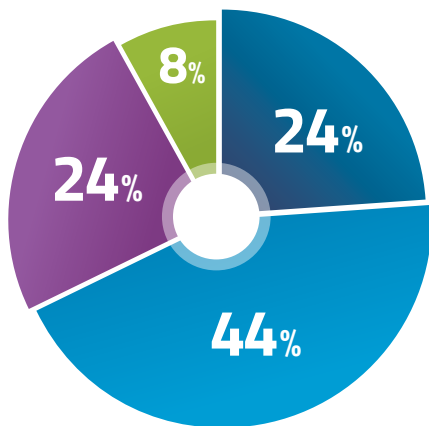
**7D. SOCIAL MEDIA SHOULD NOT BE USED AT ALL DURING A DISRUPTIVE INCIDENT**



7E. IF SOCIAL MEDIA WERE DOWN, OUR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS CAPABILITIES WOULD BE SERIOUSLY LIMITED



7F. SOCIAL MEDIA IS BETTER THAN EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SOFTWARE FOR SMES

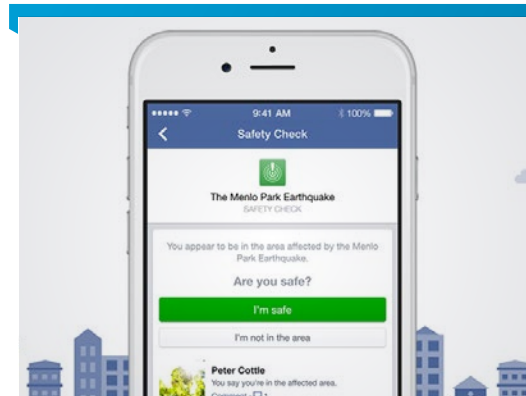


## Case study

### Facebook Crisis Response: a technical review

This is an in-depth analysis of the Facebook Crisis Response tool. This section digs deeper in the analysis of social media tools for crisis communications, to better understand their applications and raise awareness among an expert audience. Facebook was chosen as a case study as it offers one of the most advanced solutions among the most popular social media brands. In addition, it also owns three different platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram), which increases its relevance.

Facebook Crisis Response has the objective to allow individuals who find themselves in the midst of an incident to mark themselves safe, thus notifying all of their Facebook contacts. This is one of the most popular and visible features offered by the company, which has supported communities affected by events such as natural disasters and terrorist incidents. According to tech magazines such as *Tech Crunch* and *Tech Times*, Facebook Crisis Response has been used in over 300 crises, in 80 different countries.



Furthermore, the tool also allows users to provide or ask for help in the case of a crisis, as well as to make donations to charities or relief organizations. However, as Facebook state on its website, this is not a substitute for local emergency services, especially if urgent help is needed. Finally, the Data for Good feature uses aggregate and anonymized data to provide insights to local emergency services and individuals seeking help. For instance, the platform shows the levels of internet accessibility in certain areas to help maximize the impact of communications to prevent or respond to health emergencies. Similarly, the service also builds disaster maps, sharing intelligence on displacement or evacuations.

The disaster response function is expanding at Facebook and it has useful applications both for the community and local emergency services that can benefit from analytics and insights they would not have otherwise. However, despite all these benefits, it is worth noting that Facebook Crisis response is not designed to replace dedicated crisis communications arrangements, such as emergency notification software. Rather, the main reason for the existence of this tool seems to be to serve and support local communities as an aid to pre-established plans.

Ideally, organizations should all use dedicated emergency notification software built for crisis management purposes. This type of software ensures reliable networks, two-way communication and privacy for its users. However, organizations (especially SMEs) might prefer cheaper and more familiar solutions such as WhatsApp. This begs the question of what would happen if a crisis hit while social media platforms were not available. If, due to business needs, social media platforms have become some sort of critical infrastructure, then there needs to be a serious conversation about bringing tech companies and crisis managers, particularly emergency notification providers, closer together.

## Key takeaways

**1.** Organizations employ social media platforms to monitor mainly physical disruptions, such as natural disasters, public protests and terrorist incidents. Still, the majority of organizations also use them to monitor or gather information during IT outages or cyber-attacks. The variety of incidents where social media is utilized increases the need for studies and analyses such as this one.

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**2.** Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp remain the most used social media platforms by practitioners. Facebook and Twitter are the favorite choice for communicating with the public, while WhatsApp is more common to communicate with internal staff and top management. It is worth wondering whether commercial messaging apps are appropriate to exchange sensitive information during a crisis.

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**3.** Respondents show reservations about social media platforms despite using them, especially regarding factors such as data privacy or the reliability of information. However, less than half of them use emergency notification software to validate the information gathered, as they prefer it to less accurate methods such as official news channels.

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**4.** The report highlights the attractiveness of social media for crisis communications, due to low costs and staff familiarity with them, among others. Further, professionals think that social media has a responsibility in guaranteeing a reliable service during an incident. Nearly half of the sample rely on social media to the extent which, in case these were unavailable, their crisis communications capabilities would be seriously limited.

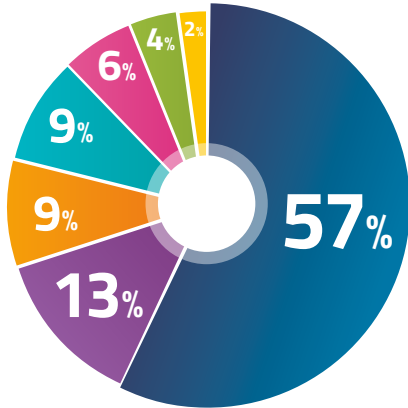
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**5.** Social media companies seem to try to engage with the crisis management field, by building new tools as shown in this report, while on the other hand crisis managers are starting to have discussions about this issue. However, what is lacking now is a conversation between social media companies and crisis managers. This missing link should be considered as quite alarming, as right now several organizations around the world are using platforms built for regular messaging as key tools to communicate during a terrorist attack or a natural disaster. While apps such as WhatsApp are undoubtedly useful, they are not fit for professional crisis communications plans in their current versions.

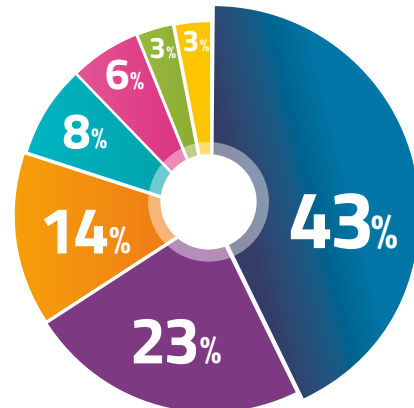


# Annex

REGION N=47



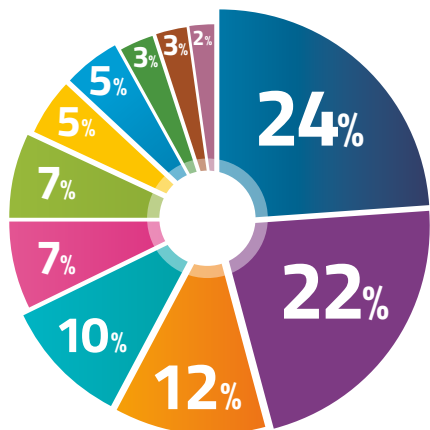
FUNCTIONAL ROLES N=47



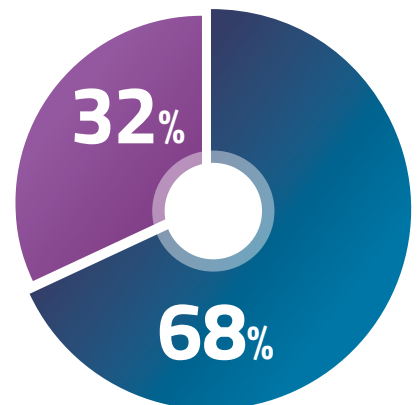
- Europe 57%
- North America 13%
- Asia 9%
- Central and Latin America 9%
- Sub-Saharan Africa 6%
- Middle East 4%
- Oceania 2%

- Business Continuity 43%
- Risk Management 23%
- Communications 14%
- Information technology 8%
- Information/cyber security 6%
- Physical security 3%
- Insurance 3%

INDUSTRY SECTOR N=47



SIZE OF ORGANIZATION N=47



- Banking and finance 24%
- Professional services 22%
- Information technology 12%
- Education and training 10%
- Energy and utilities 7%
- Law enforcement ad security 7%
- Healthcare 5%
- Retail and wholesale 5%
- Transport and logistics 3%
- Engineering and infrastructure 3%
- Not for profit 2%

- Large enterprise (more than 250 employees) 68%
- Small and medium enterprise (250 employees or less) 32%

## About the authors



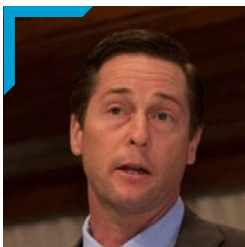
### GIANLUCA RIGLIETTI

Gianluca Riglietti is Head of Research & Intelligence at PANTA RAY and an experienced researcher in the field of Business Continuity Management and Organizational Resilience, with over 30 publications between industry reports and academic research. He has several years of experience managing and delivering research projects for global organizations such as Zurich, International SOS, Siemens, SAP and Everbridge, and he is an international public speaker. In addition, he is a member of the Italian National Observatory for the Cyber Security, Resilience and Business Continuity of Electric Grids and a contributor to national and international standards such as the Italian Body of Standardization (UNI). His consulting work involves organizations in the automotive, retail and defence sectors. He is also an Executive PhD student at the Department of Management Engineering of the Politecnico di Milano School of Management. Previously, he worked as Research & Insight Manager at the Business Continuity Institute, where he conducted over 20 studies using the BCI panel. He earned a Master of Arts in Geopolitics, Territory and Security from King's College London. His full LinkedIn profile can be found here: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/gianluca-riglietti-cbci-15958578>



### LUCILA AGUADA

Lucila Aguada is a licensed psycho-metrician with expertise in quantitative and qualitative research. Lucila is Research and Intelligence Advisor at PANTA RAY and has experience managing global research projects in Business Continuity Management and Organizational Resilience. Her past experience includes conducting research on behalf of non-profits, pharmaceutical and healthcare clients. Her full LinkedIn profile can be found here: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/lucila-aguada-cbci-96b81748>



### JOE EYERMAN

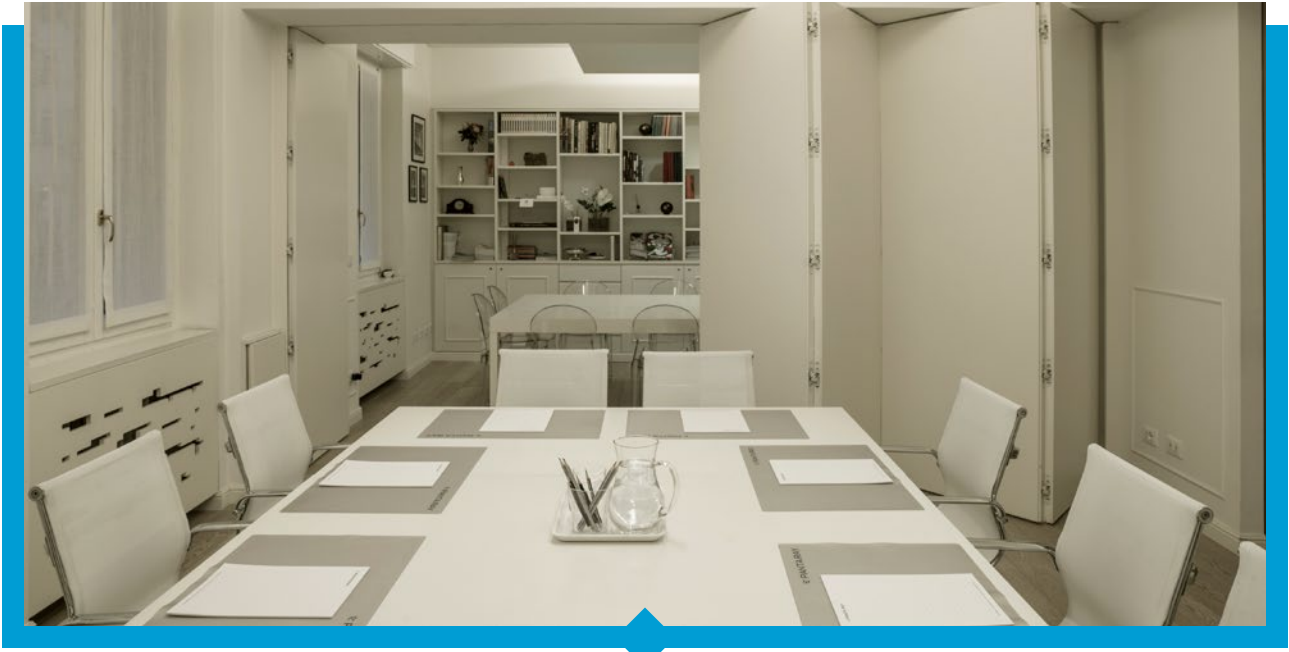
Joe Eyeran, PhD, is a senior research methodologist at RTI International ([www.rti.org](http://www.rti.org)) with over 22 years of professional applied research experience studying the intersection of technology, terrorism and crisis response funded by US federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). He has extensive experience managing large and small projects that include randomized controlled trials, social surveys, quantitative and qualitative assessments and policy impact evaluations. Dr. Eyeran will advise on the overall project, contribute to the design and analysis of the survey and will coordinate with industry and public sector partners in the USA. His full LinkedIn profile can be found here: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/joeeyerman>



### KAMAL MUHAMMAD

Kamal Muhammad, PhD, is a Research Analyst at the Business Continuity Institute, with more than five years' experience as a researcher in economics, working on economic growth and development. He previously worked as a Research Fellow/Economist at the United Nations, where he was attached to the Macroeconomic Policy Division and was responsible for conducting policy analysis and providing technical assistance to member states. He holds a PhD in Economics (University of Hull) and a Masters in Development Economics and Policy (University of Manchester). His full LinkedIn profile can be found here: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kamal-muhammad-phd-a00a9327>

 **PANTA RAY**  
*Inspiring Resilience*



*Founded in 2009 by industry thought leader Gianna Detoni, PANTA RAY is a training and management consulting firm specializing in the disciplines of organizational resilience.*

*Over the years, we have supported many organizations around the world in defining and improving their business continuity, crisis and risk management.*

*Our approach is to guide organizations towards resilience through each and every step of the way, in line with the most recent industry best practices and international standards.*

*Thanks to our industry partners, which are among the best players in their fields, we are able to offer a 360-degree service with no equal in the resilience industry.*



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