

Is social media helping or hindering?

by CAPTAIN KOALA

As I write this article, we have bushfires burning in various part of the State and elevated fire danger conditions in the west of the State. There have been several bushfires with most of them contained quickly by firefighters with only a couple of them escalating and threatening lives and destroying properties.

There is no doubt that we still have a bit of summer to go, and whilst it started late, the occurrence of elevated fire danger days is likely to continue for the next month or two. Whilst not directly related to this article, it is an opportunity to remind you all to stay focussed on your own health and safety first and foremost. You are not much use to your fellow crew members if you have not looked after yourself and become unwell or injured.

As an avid social media user – yes, I have a Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter) and Tik Tok accounts. I don't use them all regularly, but I have found that they have become a source of up to date information. As their use increases and becomes more popular, the availability of information is increasing.

If you are like me and occasionally search for videos, post or photos of bushfires, new technology, firefighting, and other related information, you will know that the algorithms kick into overdrive. I am certain that you have all had the experience where you have had a conversation about buying something new and half an hour later your Facebook feed is flooded with potential suppliers. Whilst this is annoying, it does indicate the power of the back end systems and I often

wonder are we using them to their full potential when we are trying to obtain fire-ground intelligence and better inform the community of the location of emergencies and what is occurring.

Now I know there will be the anti social media people. Let's explore the negatives and positives.

For the negatives, social media is rapid and quick. This speed can contribute to the rapid spread of unverified information, rumours and false information. This can also support the dissemination of misinformation, that whilst it was likely the right intent, due to the lack of understanding of bushfire behaviour they could be spreading incorrect information.

The use of social media can result in a high volume of messages and requests directed at emergency services. This may strain the available resources required to focus on response efforts. If there is a greater reliance on social media as a trusted source, can we be confident that it is always accessible. As we saw in the recent storm event in Gippsland, with the power shutting down for some time, the availability of mobile phone reception ceased.

Finally for the negatives, there is the very real potential for emotional impact. A person who has evacuated and can't get back to their home, can see images or videos of their house or local area that could have an emotional impact.

For the positives, the ability for incident managers, local residents, community members, those who have evacuated, tourists and a wide range of others to gain real

time updates is significant.

The vast majority of the population has access to a mobile phone and a social media account. Social media also provides a wide reach to get a message out very quickly. Emergency services can reach a broader and more diverse audience that previously thought.

Some of the social media systems will also support a form of two way communication. Individuals can report emergencies, share their experiences, and ask for help or information. Emergency responders can use this feedback to assess the situation and provide more targeted assistance.

During emergencies, individuals often share photos, videos, and first hand accounts on social media platforms. This user-generated content can provide valuable insights for emergency responders, helping them understand the extent of the situation and respond accordingly. Social media is also a quick and efficient way to share critical information such as emergency contact numbers, evacuation routes, and shelter locations. This information can be easily accessible to those in affected areas.

Emergency services can use social media to monitor conversations, trends, and sentiments related to a specific emergency. This data can aid in understanding public concerns, dispelling rumours, and adjusting response strategies accordingly. Finally for the positives, social media platforms are used for crisis mapping, where users contribute information about the location and severity of incidents. This crowd sourced data can be valuable for emergency



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The role of a board member involves contributing to VFBV direction, policy determination and monitoring the performance and governance of the Association. This includes actively contributing to policy discussion, consulting with CFA volunteers and contributing to the identification and management of strategic issues.

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responders in prioritising their efforts and allocating resources effectively.

The frustration for me now is that CFA and other fire agencies have a large component of their members who are very social media savvy. They use social media daily to check up on family and friends, to communicate with others and, to order their latest purchase or to check out what is happening around town. They can quickly and efficiently communicate a message through social media.

I appreciate CFA has a range of policies and procedures in place around what firefighters can post on social media either their own personal accounts or the fire brigade that they are involved with. The unfortunate downside to this in my view is that we now have a significant number of social media posts that show firefighting aircraft dropping water on a fire edge, drawing water from a water

source or just flying around. These social media posts seem to be supported by CFA and other agencies and are regularly posted on social media accounts.

During the 2019/20 bushfire season we saw the start of an expectation by the community that if they didn't have a helicopter or a large plane buzzing over their house, they believed that they weren't getting the support they deserved. So good is the social media portrayal of aircraft, the expectation has increased significantly. What this has also done, is downgraded the absolute importance of ground based crews and the role they have in extinguishing bushfires.

I genuinely fear that the community is forming a view that aircraft put out bushfires. Don't get me wrong, aircraft have an amazing ability to shape, slow or knock down flames on a bushfire, they don't have the ability to complete the extinguishment

work. This is the role of ground based crews and will likely always be.

Social media has a wide range of benefits and providing we can carefully manage the negatives, I firmly believe it has a place in intelligence gathering, better informing incident managers of the location and activities of bushfires and informing the community of where the bushfire is located and what it is doing. A coordinated effort to use social media for good, can significantly improve the understanding of bushfires by all involved. We can also balance the community views about the role the various equipment and resources plays in extinguishment.

We are now in the 2020s, it is time to better use the technology that is available that will improve safety for firefighters and the community, enable better and much more rapid decision making and communicate a message in a more aligned method that the community expects.

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