



Student Name: Melanie Baker-Jones

Project Title: Web 2.0 in disaster and emergency: a risk assessment of tortious liability

Commencement Date: February 2014

PHD PROGRESS REPORT 2015

There has been extensive uptake of social media amongst the Australian public. At the same time, there is an expectation that Emergency Management agencies will utilise social media technologies to communicate warnings and risk information during emergencies. As opposed to individual social media utilisation, Emergency Management agencies have broader considerations of legal liability to consider. As yet the extent of liability in this area in Australia is unknown.

Initial analysis of background theory, suggests that social media technologies can be beneficial in a number of areas. In the first instance, for pushing out timely information to a large audience. Equally, monitoring social media streams can provide extensive on-the-scene data which can be utilised by Emergency Management agencies to gain greater situational awareness. A third aspect, which emerges, is the conversational nature of the platforms. In order for risk information to be accepted and acted on by the public, the theory suggests it needs to incorporate public perceptions of risk. When appropriate protocols are in place, utilisation of social media as a conversational platform, may provide immediate feedback on public perceptions of the risks that are being faced, allowing Emergency Management agencies to adapt their messaging accordingly.

With these benefits in mind, further research is now underway to determine the extent of legal liability that Emergency Management agencies in Australia may face when things go wrong on social media or where checks are not in place. When the risk of liability is clarified, appropriate protocols can be identified which reduce the likelihood of liability. When these identified protocols are subsequently implemented, Emergency Management agencies may feel more comfortable that social media technologies can be effectively leveraged without concerns over legal repercussions. The resulting utilisation of social media, as an additional risk communication channel, can act to benefit both the public and the agencies themselves.