Disinformation and Emergency Communication

Who and how do we trust in a post-truth crisis?

During a natural disaster or public emergency, finding the right information can be life-saving, while incorrect or inaccurate information is never as dangerous. In countries with high rates of internet access, online newspapers and social media feeds are the main sources of daily news and information for the majority of the population. Along with the shift from print and broadcast media to many-to-many platforms in the Nordic countries, concerns about cyber fraud, fake news and disinformation have escalated. Nevertheless, emergency services and police departments across Scandinavia continue to use Twitter/X and other social media platforms to warn the public about incidents that might pose a threat.

Brief Points

- Disinformation can be a serious threat to social media users during an emergency situation, but lack of information can also be dangerous.

- In Europe, emergency alerts transmitted directly to mobile phones provide urgent information to the public.

- First responders in Nordic countries are concerned about many-to-many platform communication's susceptibility to disinformation, but they continue to use social media accounts to inform the general public about emergency situations.

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What is disinformation?

An information influence activity or disinformation operation exploits online public communication to achieve political or economic objectives. The main purpose of such activities is to influence decision-makers in a targeted country to act in the interest of the state or a non-state entity conducting the activities, or to cause distrust in authorities.

As a result of increasing concern about disinformation in Europe, the European Commission established a High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. According to this group (2018: 3), disinformation includes "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit". While this definition seems straight-forward, it is important to note that the terms 'fake news' and 'disinformation' are politically charged. Disinformation is a 'floating' concept, often found in partisan debates about truth and falsehood (Freelon & Wells, 2020). In other words, there is a politics of falsehood (Farkas & Schou, 2018) at play, in which one person's disinformation can be another's truth.

Giving rise to a veritable feedback loop, the debate on disinformation as a growing concern has implications for new media users' interpretations of news and views, and more broadly, for public trust in the information provided by government institutions and authorities. This is especially challenging for emergency communicators.

For social media users, it is difficult to know who or what to trust in a crisis, when distrust in a source offering sound advice can be as dangerous as unwarranted trust in misleading information.

In this brief, we discuss the issue of social media disinformation during emergencies and explore how this problem is understood in the highly digitalized Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

Nordic perspectives

In Norway, several government agencies have closed their social media accounts due to concerns about information security on social media platforms, and the commercial use of personal data by companies such as Facebook (now Meta). Similar debates are taking place in the other Nordic countries.

In Finland, media literacy has been introduced into school curricula to strengthen the ability of children to identify manipulative and misleading content in social media posts and online forums, and on fake news websites.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap, MSB) sees disinformation as a serious threat. MSB director Dan Eliasson said, 'Information influence activities can disrupt the way our society functions by exploiting vulnerabilities and challenging the values that are fundamental to our way of life such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights —ultimately endangering the life and health of our people' (MSB 2018: 5). MSB is thus working actively to develop the capacity to identify, understand, and counter information influence campaigns targeting Sweden, thereby also strengthening 'social resilience'.
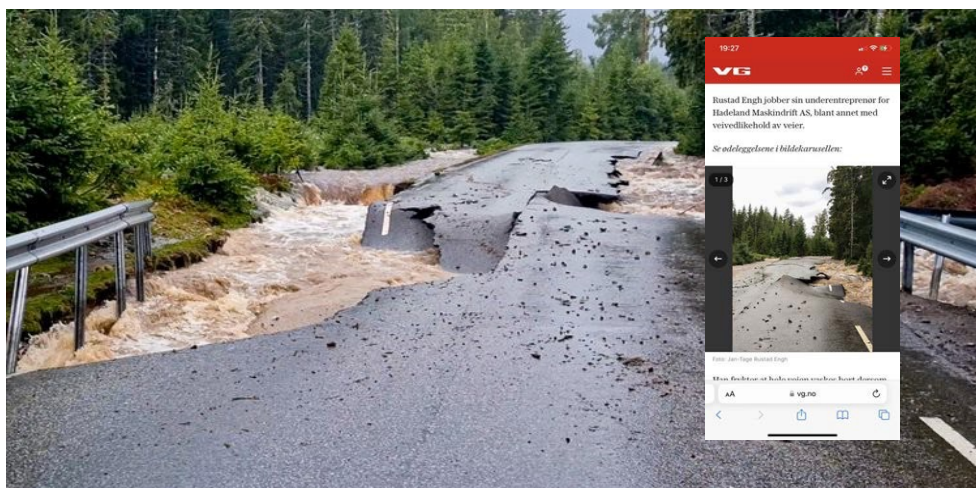
In the highly digitalized Nordic societies, communicating risks and warning the public are an increasingly complicated tasks, due to the growing spectrum of old and new media outlets, the complexity of dissemination of information on social media platforms, and the cross-boundary and even global character of hazards and threats such as pandemics. While various communication efforts can be deployed to inform the public about threats and risks and, ideally, prevent injury and death, poorly designed messaging can also have harmful consequences.

Despite widespread concerns about the risk of disinformation and hidden algorithms on social media platforms, emergency services and police departments across Scandinavia continue to use Twitter (now X) to update and alert people about incidents of interest to the public, including accidents, violent assaults and weather-related conditions that pose an immediate threat to the safety of people in the vicinity.
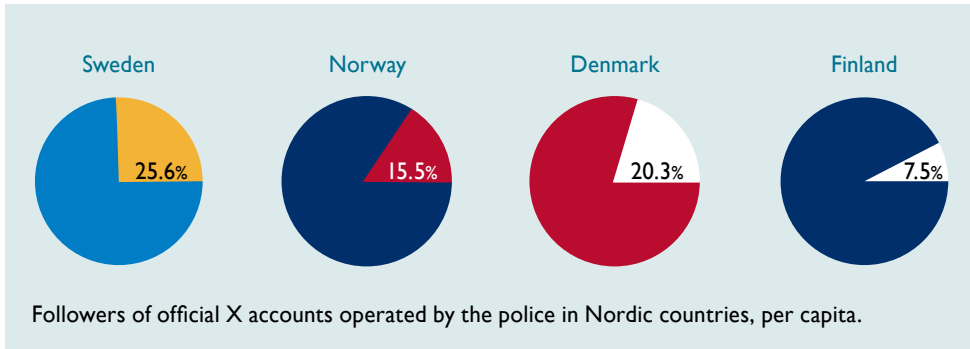
Current use of X by Nordic police

Police departments in the Nordic countries operate a large number of accounts on social media platforms. For example, in Sweden as of 2020, the police maintained 250 active accounts on Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok (Polisen 2020). Through these accounts, the Swedish police want to reach out to the public with information and to encourage dialogue as a means to increase interest in policing as a career opportunity and build public trust in the police.

The Norwegian Police Service also uses a variety of social media platforms, including X, Facebook, and Instagram. Norwegian police first appeared on Twitter in 2011, when Oslo Police District registered its official account, famously using a smiley in one of their early tweets.[1] Today, every Norwegian police station has an X account, while the twelve police districts have their own emergency control room-based accounts where they report on incidents for strictly informational purposes (Flinterud 2022).

Flooding in Norway, and online news, August 2023. Photo: Kenneth Embre; Post: VG online news (vg.no)

Sweden	Norway	Denmark	Finland
25.6%	15.5%	20.3%	7.5%

Followers of official X accounts operated by the police in Nordic countries, per capita.

The Danish police have accounts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, X and YouTube and they use social media as a supplemental communications for information on everyday policing, major incidents, and, occasionally, asking the public for help in finding a missing person or a suspected perpetrator. They also use X and Facebook to give advice on crime prevention, and Instagram and LinkedIn for recruiting.[2]

The police in Finland communicate on social media with unit accounts and personal expert accounts to educate the public about police work, and quickly communicate safety information to followers. Every police department has its own social media account, using primarily X, Facebook, and Instagram, but also TikTok and LinkedIn.[3]

In Sweden, official police accounts on X have roughly 3.6 million followers. Though avid social media users probably follow more than one of these accounts, the total number of followers represents 25% of the Swedish population of 10.49 million.

In Denmark, official police accounts on X have about 1.5 million followers (or 20% of the Danish population of 5.9 million). In Norway, official police accounts on X have roughly 1 million followers, which is 15.5% of Norway's population of 5.46 million.

In Finland, police unit accounts on X have about 450,000 followers, representing 7.5% of Finland's population of 5.55 million. This percentage is less than other Nordic countries, but it does not include the 'expert' accounts of the Finnish police service that are listed on police websites.[3]

The European Union's digital future

The European common emergency number 112 was introduced as early as 1991, but with steadily improving mobile phone connectivity, the operation of the European emergency number and other measures to ensure effective and disinformation-free emergency communication have taken on increasing importance in the European Union (EU). In 2018, the EU issued the European Electronic Communications Code (EU Directive 2018/1972), which requires all EU member states to ensure that emergency alerts can be transmitted to the general public, including temporary visitors, via mobile phone in the event of an emergency. Providers of mobile number-based communication services are thus required to cooperate with government agencies to provide emergency alerts to all mobile phones that use their services.

In 2019, the Body of European Regulators for Electronic Communications (BEREC) issued guidelines for the effectiveness of different types of public warning systems as required by Directive 2018/1972. BEREC describes Cell Broadcast and Location Based SMS messaging applications as systems that fall under the new EU Directive's Article 110(1) and internet access service (IAS) Mobile Application Based public warnings as a system that falls under Article 110(2) of the EU directive.

An IAS system relies on an OTT (Over the Top) application server that communicates with its associated app, running on the device of users who have installed that app. While no Nordic countries have opted for a nation-wide IAS system, a number of Swedish schools are using an IAS app-based warning for incidents that might happen in schools.

A Location Based SMS system sends text messages to all mobile phones within range of specific cell towers, which means that a list of all users or subscribers to a telecom service currently located in a target area must be kept up to date at all times. Sweden and Finland have opted for Location Based SMS alerts. Finland put its Location Based SMS system to use during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Sweden's system is still in development.

Cell Broadcast (CB) public warnings are broadcast indiscriminately to all mobile phones in a particular area, similar to a radio signal. Unlike SMS alerts, cell broadcast notifications come as a message that appears on every mobile within range of specific cell towers. The phone can also vibrate and make a siren-like sound, irrespective of the phone's settings. Denmark and Norway have launched CB alert systems. The USA, Canada, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway and Denmark are among the countries that are also currently using cell broadcast emergency alert systems.

In April 2023, the Danish Emergency Management Agency (BRS) launched Denmark's new mobile-based emergency alert system, known as Sirenen ('the Siren'). The new system supplements the existing 1,078 emergency sirens in the country.

While Norway is not an EU member state, the government of Norway has also adopted a mobile-based public warning service in compliance with the European Electronic Communications Code. After the introduction of new legislation in 2022, the Ministry of Justice and Emergency Preparedness directed the Police, the National Communications Authority (Nkom) and the Directorate for Societal Security and Emergency Preparedeness (DSB) to provide a service for cell broadcast emergency alerts to the Norwegian public. DSB then signed a contract with Everbridge, a company in the emergency management technology sector that maintains emergency alert systems in over twenty countries.

The new system, known as 'Nødvarsel på mobil' (Emergency alert on mobile) was test launched in June 2023, to coincide with Norway's biannual test of 1,250 air-raid sirens. Then, in August 2023, the system was first used in a real emergency: an extreme weather event in eastern Norway with heavy flooding.

It is important to note that mobile-based emergency alerts are limited to short messages that can fit into a single screen on a mobile phone. These messages can only provide instructions on immediate action to take and, above all, where to find further information. Emergency alerts are not meant to replace other means of

emergency communication, but rather, to rapidly warn the public about an urgent hazard.

New technologies such as cell broadcast emergency alerts help emergency responders reach the public quickly and efficiently. However, the new systems are unidirectional, and do not allow for feedback from the public to emergency managers. They also share many limitations common to other digital means of communication, such as reliance on a stable electricity supply and steady network connectivity. For these reasons, mobile-based emergency alerts cannot serve as the only means of informing the public about critical situations: Despite the risk of disinformation and misinformation, social media still have an important role to play.

Unlike emergency alerts, social media platforms are many-to-many platforms for communication in which users can share important, even life-saving information in close to real-time. Emergency managers use social media not only to share information, but in some cases also to monitor conditions on the ground. Information sharing and interpretation of information received on social media during emergencies is challenging, but the risk associated with a lack of information is also important to bear in mind.
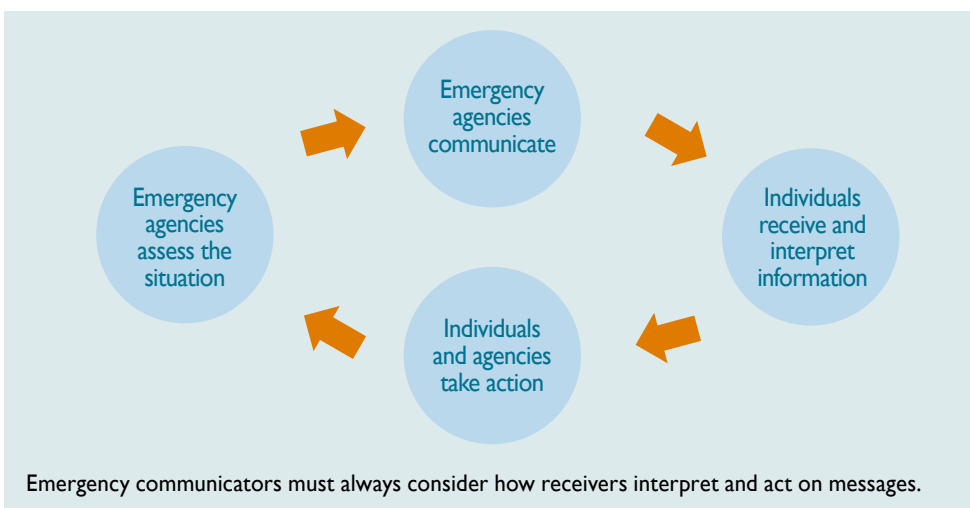
Key Findings

- In the Nordic countries, emergency communicators in police departments use social media to offer critical information and safety advice on a regular basis. The difficult work of these communicators, and the life-saving potential of both social media messaging and emergency alerts, should be duly acknowledged.

- Emergency communicators must be well prepared and equipped with the right skills to make effective use of social media messaging during emergencies.

Emergency communicators must always consider how receivers interpret and act on messages.

- A major difficulty these communicators face is that the potentially life-saving advice they provide competes with other user-generated content, including disinformation. Hidden algorithms and filters also make social media communication difficult.

- The difficulties of using social media platforms for emergency communication should be duly recognized, but concerns about disinformation should not stop us from seeking information on social media during an emergency. ■

Notes

1. See: https://x.com/oslopolitiops/ status/119323431681523712

2. See: https://politi.dk/aktuelt/sociale-medier

3. See: https://poliisi.fi/en/social-media

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THE PROJECT

Digital Emergency Communication (DIGeMERGE) studies the use of digital tools and solutions for communication with the public during emergencies in the four Nordic countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

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PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.