8-10-2022

Enabling Zarti-inspired Crisis Response in a Flooding Disaster in Myanmar

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TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Information and communication technologies afford users with unprecedented opportunities to respond to societal challenges. This study examines the emerging use of social media in complex social phenomenon, natural disasters. We adopt a Myanmar culture, called Zarti[1] as a national spirit, as our theoretical lens to explore how this indigenous culture influences the experiences of local communities and enables crisis response in Myanmar. By presenting a case study of Myanmar floods in 2015, we identify nine core elements of Zarti culture at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels, namely—identity, self-reliance, generosity, empathy, Parahita, altruism, trust, solidarity and political influence—as instrumental in enabling how community members perceive and enact social media affordances in crisis response and achieve relevant social outcomes. We identify four affordances as they have emerged in relation to the underlying material properties of social media (i.e. Facebook) and user characteristics (in terms of user roles, user goals, and cultural values), in the context of disaster response. At the individual level, our data reveals that the possession of Zarti values of identity and self-reliance was instrumental in enabling information creation, gathering, and dissemination on Facebook that affords different ways of creating crisis-awareness. At the interpersonal level, our analysis finds that the embracement of Zarti values of Parahita and trust played a central role in uniting volunteers with a shared interest to engage in relief efforts through Facebook that affords relief coordination. Similarly, our evidence shows that Zarti's emphasis on altruism of group members was crucial in enabling efficient communication on Facebook that affords volunteer mobilization. At the organizational level, our case demonstrates that upholding the Zarti values of solidarity and political influence was essential in gathering and organizing talented people with similar aspirations on social media for collaboration that affords crowdsourcing, in producing optimal solutions.

In general, social media created new possibilities for expressing and reflecting indigenous values amongst members of the community and thus enabled new ways for Zarti-inspired crisis response. In particular, influenced by the values stemming from Myanmar Zarti culture, social media-enabled crisis response was successfully realized in Myanmar. People benefited substantially from social media use in terms of information access, effective communication and collaborations during a flood disaster. We present two contributions of our study. We contribute to the small number of extant studies of ICTs and societal challenges (Majchrzak et al. 2012) in the contemporary context of Myanmar. We offer a novel explanation of how Zarti culture facilitates crisis response activities involving individuals, groups, and organizations as local communities during the 2015 Myanmar floods. The concept of Zarti culture sheds light on how indigenous values can become intertwined with the capabilities of social media and highlights the need for indigenous perspectives (Davidson and Andrade 2018) to crisis response to advance our understanding of the diversity of digital phenomena, such as social media-enabled social movement, across cultural contexts.

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[1] The Universal Burmese-English-Pali Dictionary - [PDF Document] (vdocuments.mx) (p.298)

References

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