### TRAVEL SAFETY

**RECOGNISING RISKS & HOSTILE SITUATIONS**

- Humanitarian cargo logistics
- Interviews with Waze & DJI
- Social media & resilient communities
- Data breaches & reporting dilemmas
- Modelling critical infrastructure interdependencies
- Maritime future of urban disaster response
- Situational prevention & terrorism
- Urban resilience in Skopje
- Fake alarms & mass alerts
- Hybrid attacks

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Contents

News ........................................ 4

Comment
Daring to be different ..................... 8
Kirsty McKinlay-Stewart says that now is the time to tell as many people as possible how CRJ, together with its international family of experts, can work together, navigating the choppy waters of crises as we go

Closing the gap ............................ 10
Robert Fagan explores how the concept of operationalising resilience helps first responders to be ready for the impact and surge of an event in the face of acute stress and trauma

Resilience
Community cohesion ...................... 14
Dennis Davis examines how a disenfranchised and vulnerable community has evolved with cohesion and solidarity after the Grenfell Tower fire

Growing resilience ....................... 16
Emily Hough speaks to Deborah Higgins, Head of the UK Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College, to discover her views on resilience, leadership and communities

Cascading consequences ................. 18
Donya Hajializadeh announces a predictive model that uses resilience-driven decisions to provide key hazard scenarios for use in consequence planning and risk management

Committing to change ................... 20
Rade Rajkovichski and Zoran Dorevski look at Skopje’s involvement in an urban resilience project that seeks to mitigate city risks in the face of climate change

Rohingya refugee crisis .................. 24
James McArthur and Jorg Szarynski look at how geospatial technology is helping to make refugee camps safer

Petasosic care in Syria .................... 28
Erika Wichrow says that creative thinking, problem solving, inclusive dialogue, trust-capacity-resilience building, accelerated holistic healing and reconstruction are vital to ensure no one is left behind

Closure after disasters .................. 30
Jay Levinson and Abraham Domb look at helping bereaved people who have lost their loved ones in mass casualty disasters

Maritime urban disaster response ....... 32
Brittany L Card and David P Polatty contend that naval forces will increasingly play a critical role in supporting response activities in major disasters

Globalism and world security .......... 36
Globalism is essential to make the world a safer place, says Monique M Chouraeshkenazi, but more work is needed

Security & Terrorism
Situational prevention ................... 40
Brian Dillon explains that situational prevention should be considered for more than target hardening

Hybrid warfare as a societal threat ....... 43
We are seeing symptoms of a new societal security environment, according to Ørjan Karlsson

Societal resilience and malicious actors 44
Christo Motz interviews Itay Gil on public preparedness for terrorist and marauding firearms attacks

False alarms and mass alerts ........... 48
What happens when mass warning messages are made in error, or are deliberately faked? Lina Kolesnikova investigates

Data breaches and disclosure .......... 52
So, you have had a data breach. Do you fix it and keep quiet, or tell the world and risk the consequences? Tony Jaques discusses

CRJ: Daring to be different p8

Rohingya refugees p24
Online enforcement ........................................... 54
Jason Daniels looks at how partnerships and collaboration are helping to keep consumers safe from dangerous and fraudulent products

Humanitarian cargo logistics
Exploring complex interactions ................................. 56
Nicola Webb, Stuart Smith and Emily Hough report on a fascinating round-table event, hosted by Volga-Dnepr at the Farnborough International Airshow

Logistical challenges ........................................... 58
Stuart Lane outlines some of the challenges encountered by small, start-up disaster response organisations

Global aviation resource hub .................................... 60
Emily Hough speaks to Pauli Immonen of Aviation sans Frontières to learn more about how it can help during the complex interaction between NGOs and the aviation cargo industry after a disaster

Big data and analytics ........................................... 62
The humanitarian sector has a great opportunity to apply the advances pioneered by the commercial world, writes David Prior

Travel risk management
Beyond the smoke and mirrors .................................. 66
Lloyd Figgins discusses how to make employees – and employers – more risk intelligent when it comes to travel

Low threat, high fear ........................................... 70
International travel and tourism are still growing, despite political instability, terrorism and crises, says Rob McAllister. But what are the effects of these events in terms of sector resilience?

Beware the negligence trap ..................................... 74
International employers are potentially liable for the safety of their staff, wherever they are. Richard C Pendry asks, is your organisation up to scratch?

Spotting trouble ............................................. 78
Casey Brunelle recounts the story of the Airport Watch programme and the invaluable support that volunteers provide at airports

Travel risk planning ........................................... 81
Paul Higgins provides details of essential research that everybody should undertake before travelling abroad, whether for business or pleasure

Survival packing ............................................. 82
Colin McGowan and Mike Greville say you should be constantly alert to avoid danger, and make sure you have a plan to survive

Air crash in Nepal ........................................... 84
Peter McMahon speaks to Suneeta Bhardwaj about lessons learnt after a major accident occurred at Tribhuvan International Airport

CRJ R&D
The sky’s not the limit ........................................... 88
Romeo Durscher of drone giant DJI speaks to Emily Hough about drones being used in safety and security applications

Social ties ......................................................... 92
Danaë Metaxa, Paige Maas and Daniel P Aldrich describe how they worked with Facebook, using geolocation data to understand evacuation, based on the structure of people’s social networks

Reducing congestion, saving lives ................................ 94
Emily Hough interviews Avichai Bakst from Waze to trace the journey of this crowdsourced, community-driven app and how it is now helping emergency responders

Regulars
Events ......................................................... 96
Frontline ......................................................... 98
An interview by Claire Sanders with Peter Kohler, founder of the Plastic Tide

Cover story: Travel risk & security
Cover image: Nick Lowndes

The UK’s Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has published its first interim report on its Disinformation and Fake News Inquiry, with its findings confirming the creeping, yet acute malaise that so many have been feeling for so long. Damian Collins, MP, Chair of the Committee, noted: “We are facing nothing less than a crisis in our democracy – based on the systemic manipulation of data to support the relentlessly targeting of citizens, without their consent, by campaigns of disinformation and messages of hate.”

We all know rumours and fake news are easily spread and rapidly amplified online, and they can have appalling consequences – on p3 you can read how false allegations spread on a social messaging app, have contributed to mob attacks and murders in India.

The interim report notes that murky forces have attempted to influence many elections around the world. Indeed, disinformation has been called an “active threat” and is a tactic of unconventional warfare in its use of technology to disrupt, magnify and distort our views of the truth. On p43 Ørjan Karlsson discusses such hybrid warfare and attacks.

There are even more disturbing implications to this manipulation and malign influence, as Lina Kolesnikova notes on p46. She reveals how false alarms in mass warning systems could create panic, mistrust or even galvanise specific groups into acts of civil unrest or revolution. Whether accidental or deliberate, the consequences could be dire.

Along with the documented human tragedies of this pernicious trend, the values of trust and truth are also significant casualties.

So, what can be done to counter this tsunami of disinformation and misinformation? As a start, we all need to rediscover our natural scepticism. We need to question, check facts and overcome our ingrained biases to believe what we want to believe. The Committee report is correct to say that digital literacy should become the “fourth pillar of education” alongside reading, writing and maths.

No single body can reclaim the narrative of truth and transparency alone. It behoves us all – governments, organisations, institutions, service providers, the media and, critically, individuals – to work together. Or else we risk entering an age of denialism, characterised by sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris as: “A dystopian vision of a world unmoored, in which nothing can be taken for granted and no one can be trusted.” And this truly would be a global crisis of epic magnitude.

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Kaitlyn E Eads | US Navy

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Dnepr at the Farnborough International Airshow

CRISIS RESPONSE

Maritime & urban response p32
Humanitarian logistics p58
Social ties are the ‘engine’ of resilience

Danaë Metaxa, Paige Maas and Daniel P Aldrich describe how they worked with Facebook, using geolocation data to understand evacuation, based on the structure of people’s social networks before, during and after hurricanes.

In early November 2017, Brooks Fisher’s neighbour in Sonoma, California, pounded on his door at 02:00hrs, rang the doorbell and shouted: “There’s a fire coming and you need to get out now! I can hear trees exploding!”

The sky was orange and the smell of smoke was strong. Fisher and his wife jumped in their car and drove out as flames engulfed houses on both sides of the road. Brooks called 911; the dispatcher told him she already had reports of fires on Rollo Road, but he and his wife saw no official responders. The only people trying to help evacuate the area were their neighbours, going door to door.

When Brooks and his wife finally returned to their home, all they found were ashes. But they were safe.

Brooks and his family survived thanks to this intervention by a concerned neighbour. Many deaths that occur during events such as flooding, fires, hurricanes and mudslides, could be prevented by leaving vulnerable areas, but people don’t always move, even after receiving evacuation orders or warnings of imminent risk.

To understand why, the authors worked with Facebook to understand evacuation patterns based on the structure of people’s social networks before, during and after hurricanes.

We found that social networks, especially connections to those beyond immediate family, influence decisions to leave or stay in place before disasters.

Many communities that are vulnerable to disasters put a lot of resources into providing residents with early warnings. For example, in Montecito, California, during the January 2018 mudslides, local authorities and disaster managers tried to warn residents through channels that included emails, social media alerts, press releases and deputies going door to door. Despite these efforts, not all residents evacuated and nearly two dozen lost their lives.

Traditionally, much emphasis has been placed on the role of physical infrastructure preparedness during crises. But in light of findings about the importance of social capital during crises, our team wanted to cast a light on human behaviour during these events.

Behavioural nuances

To understand evacuation behaviour, social scientists have typically asked survivors weeks, or even years, after an event to recall what they did and why. Other researchers have waited at rest stops along evacuation routes and directly interviewed evacuees fleeing oncoming hurricanes or storms.

We wanted to capture nuances of human behaviour without having to rely on memory, or upon catching people as they stopped for fuel and coffee.

To do so, we worked alongside researchers from Facebook using high-level, aggregated and anonymised summaries of city-level data before, during and after a disaster in order to construct the outcome variables based on these questions: “Did you evacuate?” and, “If you did, how soon after the disaster did you return?”

Facebook engages in numerous academic collaborations across engineering, business and research disciplines. We believe that our research team is among the first to study the movement of so many people across multiple disasters using geolocation data.

To protect user privacy, we submitted our research design to a rigorous internal review by specialists in data science, law, privacy and security. We only reported overall associations in the study population and used geolocation data no more specific than the city level. And our models only incorporated features grouped into broad categories, for example, ‘Age group 35–44’, rather than any person’s precise age.

Based on research showing that social ties provide resilience to people during crises, we suspected that social capital might be a critical factor in helping people decide whether to stay or go. By social capital, we mean people’s connections to others, and resources available to them through their social communities, such as information and support.

Some aspects of these resources are reflected through social media. With this in mind, we set out to study whether attributes of people’s social networks affected evacuation behaviour.

We looked at three different types of social ties:
- Bonding ties, which connect people to close family and friends;
- Bridging ties, which connect them through a shared interest, workplace or place of worship; and
- Linking ties, which connect them to people in positions of power.

While our research is currently being revised for resubmission to a peer-reviewed journal, we feel comfortable arguing that, controlling for a number of other factors, individuals with more
bridging ties and linking ties – that is, people with more connections beyond their immediate families and close friends – were more likely to evacuate from vulnerable areas in the days leading up to a hurricane.

We theorise that this happens for several reasons.

First, people with more bridging ties have far-reaching social networks, which may connect them to sources of support outside those areas directly affected by disasters.

Second, people with more bridging ties may have built those networks by moving or travelling more, and thus feel more comfortable evacuating far from home during a disaster.

Linking ties are also important. Our data showed that users whose social networks included following politicians and political figures, were more likely to evacuate. This may be because they were more likely to receive warning information and trust figures of authority who were disseminating that information.

In contrast, we found that having stronger bonding ties – that is, family and friends – made people less likely to evacuate leading up to a hurricane. In our view, this is a critical insight. People whose immediate, close networks are strong, may feel supported and better-prepared to weather the storm. And staying in place could have positive outcomes, such as a higher likelihood of rebuilding in existing neighbourhoods.

But it is also possible that seeing relatives, close friends and neighbours decide not to evacuate, may lead people to underestimate the severity of an impending disaster.

Such misperceptions could put people at higher immediate risk and increase damage to lives and property during a crisis. Whether people whose stronger bonding ties lead them to stay fare better or worse than others are questions for further study.

Climate change and coastal development are making disasters more frequent and damaging. Social science and social media, which are a critical part of disaster toolkits, offer opportunities to tackle critical questions about factors that can make communities and societies more resilient to disasters and crises.
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