

# FROM RESILIENT CITIES TO RESILIENT CITIZENS: the use of Facebook groups during disasters

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## KEYWORDS

- SOCIAL MEDIA
- CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT
- HURRICANE
- RESCUE
- SAFETY

Today, there are tens of millions of Facebook groups and over 200 million Facebook users all over the world who are members of Facebook groups that they consider to be a meaningful part of their lives. These groups cover a range of topics from parenting to rare diseases to fitness, but they all enable people to build relationships with the communities that matter to them, no matter where they are. Over 7 million of the Facebook groups that users have identified as meaningful are local groups that are bringing together the people and places that make up local communities, whether that be a neighborhood, a city, or a region. The connections and information these groups foster among local communities has meant that when crisis strikes, local groups have proven themselves to be critical sources of support and assistance for their members. Lack of resources and recognition are the main challenges faced by these groups, which are entirely based on civic engagement and the personal commitment of their leaders. To overcome these limits, Facebook launched in 2018 the Facebook Community Leadership Program to empower community leaders from all over the world.

## INTRODUCTION

*With almost half of American users getting news from Facebook<sup>1</sup>, the social network now ranks as one of the most popular sources for accessing information. It is an active destination for those wishing to discuss and find information about current events. However, Facebook has recognized that the value and opportunity presented by its platform of 2 billion users worldwide surpasses information sharing. In the summer of 2017, Mark Zuckerberg announced a new mission statement for Facebook – “Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.” This announcement marked an important milestone for the company and a public commitment to taking Facebook beyond information sharing and connecting people with their friends and family to becoming a platform for ensuring every Facebook user is a member of a meaningful community.*

<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, *The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook*, 2015

*With this announcement has come exciting opportunities for Facebook to expand upon the tools that users have long used to find and foster community. One of the primary vehicles for users to build community on Facebook is Facebook groups. Today, Facebook groups are used worldwide to connect people around their common interests or issues ranging from rare diseases to favorite TV shows.*

*Facebook groups are not necessarily connecting people far and wide, but instead many are bringing people closer together with the neighbors, businesses, and organizations around them. These “local groups” are the online mirror of their offline communities and are proving to be a tool for local communities to connect, communicate, and organize. In the face of a crisis or challenge, local groups and the local residents who manage them are catalysts for community action – a grassroots platform over which residents can crowdsource information and offer one another support in real-time.*

*With over 2.23 billion monthly active Facebook users<sup>2</sup> all over the world, Facebook has an unprecedented ability to reach and connect people. As a result, Facebook has a critical opportunity and unique role to play in supporting communities in preventing, managing, and recovering from crises. Local Facebook groups have already proven their ability to support communities in dealing with natural disasters and safety issues. As the number of these local groups continues to grow, they represent an important building block in fostering local communities’ resilience around the world.*

*However, the communities being created and fostered through Facebook groups are not the result of the technology platform alone. For each meaningful Facebook group, there is a community leader who is working tirelessly to ensure the group remains a safe, supportive space for its members. Currently, the majority of these leaders are doing this work on a voluntary basis, even when the work of managing the group requires more than 20 hours per week. Recognizing that behind every meaningful community there is at least one dedicated community leader, Facebook has launched the Facebook Community Leader Program to ensure the people who are building community on Facebook using groups and other tools are supported and celebrated.*

<sup>2</sup> Facebook, Q2 2018

## 1. BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH FACEBOOK GROUPS

As of 2018, Facebook estimated there were over 200 million Facebook users who were part of “meaningful groups” on the platform – groups whose members consider that group to add meaningful value to their lives. Over 7 million of these meaningful groups are local groups whose members are geographically clustered within a 50 km radius.

In times of crises large and small, local communities have used their local groups to communicate, console, and survive. Some groups such as the Houston Flood 2015 & Beyond: Support and Resource Group have developed specialized expertise to guide their community through recurring natural disasters like hurricanes, including providing up-to-date weather updates, collecting donations, cleaning out damaged homes, and filing flood insurance claims. Other local groups like France’s Wanted groups have offered solace and shelter when members haven’t been able to access their homes. In other cases, local groups serve as an online neighborhood watch, exemplified by Stolen Stuff Hawaii, a group which keeps residents of Hawaii continually up to date regarding local crime and safety issues.

The nature and characteristics of the groups which support local communities through crises vary but they can be categorized using three criteria: their typology, activities and governance.

- **Typology of the group:** groups that support communities through crises are either created prior to or during a crisis. In the case of groups that predate a crisis, these groups are generally created by a local resident to connect her community on an ongoing basis to share local news, events, and recommendations. When a crisis strikes, these groups become a trusted source of information and organization. In contrast, groups that are created during a crisis are created with the exclusive purpose of supporting a community through a specific crisis. These groups generally only last for

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the duration of the crisis and its subsequent recovery period, but in the case of communities that face recurring natural disasters (such as hurricanes), these groups can last for longer periods.

- **Activities of the group:** activities in local groups supporting a community through crisis can range from information sharing (“The intersection at Central and Smith Street is closed”) to confirmation of a member’s safety (“I’m checking in to verify I’m safe and in a secure place) to requests for help (“my grandmother and I need help”) to donations to the community (“I can give food, clothes, etc.”). These activities are not mutually exclusive and in many groups, these four activities occur simultaneously.

- **Governance of the group:** the majority of local groups are run by one or more local residents who voluntarily start the group to support their community and in so doing, become community leaders. In less frequent cases, local nonprofits or government officials create and manage a local group. However, a group’s governance is not in itself an indicator of whether or not local nonprofits or government are involved in a group. It is very common for local nonprofits, government officials, and even local businesses to be members of local groups that are run by local residents.

Regardless of which of these criteria apply to a local group, the purpose that all local groups share to support communities around the world in crisis is clearly aligned with Facebook’s priorities as a company and community. In Facebook’s 2017 “Building Global Community” Manifesto<sup>3</sup>, Mark Zuckerberg emphasized, “*the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us.*” Looking forward, Facebook’s objective is to help users build “safe,” “informed,” “civically-engaged” and “inclusive” communities all over the world. Given how users have already demonstrated local groups’ capacity for supporting communities through crisis and Facebook’s vision for the future, Facebook groups and local groups in particular are well positioned to become an important tool to help communities become more resilient .

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3 Mark Zuckeberg, “Building Global Community,” February 2017

## 2. TWO EXAMPLES OF LOCAL GROUPS BUILDING RESILIENCE IN U.S. COMMUNITIES: SIENNA PLANTATION NEIGHBORS AND STOLEN STUFF HAWAII

Two local Facebook groups, Sienna Plantation Neighbors and Stolen Stuff Hawaii, offer compelling examples of how local community leaders have used Facebook groups as a tool to harness local resources to support their communities' resilience.

### 2.1. SIENNA PLANTATION NEIGHBORS

Sienna Plantation Neighbors is a local Facebook group that was established in 2015 by Teri Zee Clayton. Teri created the group with the purpose of more closely connecting the residents of Sienna Plantation, a master-planned community in Missouri City outside of Houston, Texas. Teri's vision for the group was to *"help my neighbors connect and share information relevant to our community"*. Today, the group serves as the primary communication platform for the 24,000 residents of Sienna Plantation and approximately one out of every three residents of Sienna Plantation is a member of the group. Teri Zee Clayton and two moderators oversee the management of the group to ensure the group remains a safe, positive space for the community. Posts relative to shaming, political and religious topics are forbidden and advertising is strictly limited.

In 2017 when Hurricane Harvey struck Houston and the surrounding area including Sienna Plantation, Sienna Plantation Neighbors acted as the primary communication and disaster management platform for Teri's community. Hurricane Harvey was a record-breaking hurricane for the Houston area. In the midst of the storm, Sienna Plantation's residents were faced with unprecedented rainfall and violent winds, which triggered severe flooding. The vast majority of the region's communication and energy infrastructure was affected, leaving hundreds of residents trapped without access to electricity. Emergency call centers and first responders were overwhelmed by the scale of the destruction and unable to respond to the number of calls for help. In addition, the area that the hurricane had affected was so large that Sienna Plantation residents struggled to get access to information specific to their community.



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THE FACEBOOK COMMUNITY  
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INITIATIVE TO SUPPORT PEOPLE  
BUILDING COMMUNITIES ON  
FACEBOOK WITH A GRANT-PROGRAM  
OF \$10 MILLION.”**

In the midst of this crisis, the residents of Sienna Plantation relied on the Sienna Plantation Neighbors group. Where emergency centers were limited by their number of phone lines and operators available, the Sienna Plantation Neighbors group didn't face similar capacity constraints. Members were free to post a message with a request for help or rescue without it having to be fielded or approved. As a result, members were able to post timely, personal updates and responses to keep one another informed and supported throughout the storm.

The flow of information that Sienna Plantation Neighbors offered ensured residents were kept informed on one another's status and when needed, could even take the step of coordinating improvised rescue teams. According to Teri, *"members could easily share their location and the gravity of their situation using the group and spontaneous rescuers could then efficiently organize a response. Rides were coordinated to take people rescued from flooded areas to dry land drop-offs. People in need of a shelter were matched with neighbors with an available space. People also formed citizen patrols to keep the community safe due to the looters coming in, knowing most homes were evacuated. Donations were taken for cleaning supplies and other equipment. And as businesses near the community reopened, people posted updates on hours, locations, stock levels and length of lines."* Sienna Plantation Neighbors became a lifeline for the community, which Teri and her team estimate likely saved many lives. The efficiency and impact of Sienna Plantation Neighbors during Hurricane Harvey led to hundreds of residents joining the group during the disaster who continue to use the group as a local resource to this day.

## 2.2. STOLEN STUFF HAWAII

Stolen Stuff Hawaii is a community-watch group open to all residents of the state of Hawaii. Currently, Stolen Stuff Hawaii has over 120,000 members, around 10% of Hawaii's population, and is the largest anti-theft and anti-crime group in Hawaii. Stolen Stuff Hawaii's community is very active with an average of 30 posts per day. Members of the group assist each other to prevent thefts and crimes and assist victims of theft. Only posts relative to lost and found items and pets, missing persons, personal security, law enforcement, scams, on-topic humor and current events are allowed.

Stolen Stuff Hawaii was founded in 2014 by Michael Kitchens, a retired sergeant from the US Air Force. Mike says that he *"started the group in reaction to the theft of my brother-in-law's vehicle. At that time, I believed that a grassroots movement involving all state citizens could significantly complement the work achieved by police forces to recover stolen items and fight crime."* As the topic of crime is sensitive, the rules of the group strictly prohibit victim shaming, the promotion of violence, paybacks and compensations, and any religious and political allusions. All posts related to a theft published on the group require a police report and are otherwise deleted.

Stolen Stuff Hawaii in no way aims to substitute the important work of law enforcement, namely the Honolulu Police Department. Instead, Mike hopes the group enriches the interactions between the police force and local citizens to improve Hawaii's resilience against theft. Participation by the police force in the group is welcome and encouraged. The Honolulu Police Department has publicly underscored the added value derived from Stolen Stuff Hawaii, resulting in Mike being nominated for a Citizen's Award from Honolulu Police Department and recognized by the City & County of Honolulu for Outstanding Community Service. Policemen use the group to monitor theft activity and interact with citizens. The group also raises awareness among citizens on safety issues and prevention through online tutorials about preventing vehicle theft, abandoned vehicles, holiday crime prevention tips and dealing with phone scams. In the future, Mike hopes Stolen Stuff Hawaii's members can work together to advocate for legislative change related to crime and safety issues in their state.

Beyond crime and safety, Stolen Stuff Hawaii has also served as a collaborative platform to raise community awareness related to other important local issues. For example, during Hurricane Lane, the group provided different topical threads for

residents to remain informed and support each other. Specifically, the group launched and moderated three threads specific to the hurricane: a thread with the most up-to-date information, a thread dedicated to give advice on finding supplies, and a funny thread for people to share more humor amidst the fear surrounding the storm.

Over time, this local group has evolved to become a public service, disseminating information, bringing citizens together and training them to face challenges in their community. Today, Stolen Stuff Hawaii is moderated by a team of 18 volunteers. For Mike, since the group is now serving a public education role, *"it is very important that the group avoids monetization because making money off the misery of others is what will divide us. Anything generated from the group goes back into the group. This helps keep us together and makes us stronger."*

## 3. THE FACEBOOK COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP PROGRAM: EMPOWERING COMMUNITY LEADERS TO BUILD RESILIENCE IN THE LONG TERM

Every task, operation or organization that relies on grassroots civic engagement encounters challenges and limitations. In the case of Facebook groups, these limitations take the form of the limited resources and recognition that the community leaders behind groups receive for their efforts managing these communities. In the majority of cases, the community leaders managing Facebook groups are doing so on a voluntary basis and receive no funding or outside support. While very often members perceive the value of their groups, they may not realize how much time and effort it takes from the community leaders behind the groups.

To address these challenges and empower the community leaders who are managing groups and other communities on the platform, Facebook recently launched the Facebook Community Leadership Program. Announced in February 2018, the Facebook Community Leadership Program is a global initiative to support people building communities on Facebook with a grant-program of \$10 million. For the first year of the program, Facebook received over 6,000 applications from all over the world. In total, 115 people managing communities from 46 different countries have been selected for the program and will benefit from the following: an educational curriculum focused on leadership development, strategic community engagement and technical skills; funding to support their offline community building activities; and a network of professional support. Out of the 115 participants, 23 community leaders are managing groups focused on community resilience<sup>4</sup>. Five of the 115 participants were chosen as "community leaders in residence" and have been awarded a up to \$1 million in grants. The final amount received by each grantee will be based on a budget proposal they will work on as part of their training program. France's Wanted Community, a network of local groups led by Christian Delachet that offer support and mutual assistance to neighbors online and offline, is among these grantees.

<sup>4</sup> Other selected community leaders are managing groups dealing with civic engagement (15), with health (15), parenting (15) and education (13). Remaining ones deal with a wide range of topics such as agriculture, common ground, LGBT, etc.



In the context of local groups, it is worth considering other potential sources of support for the community leaders who are organizing and empowering the people around them. One possibility is to consider the role local governments could play to help sustain active local groups that are working in the public interest, while maintaining these groups as a space for citizen-driven conversation and action. In the context of both crisis and resilience in response to a crisis, Facebook groups could play a significant role in how government and local citizens connect. Groups are very loose networks allowing information to flow quickly, which is very different from the traditional systems relied upon when crisis strikes. In the midst of a catastrophic event, people on Facebook groups can engage instantaneously to share the latest information. This could be valuable to public authorities who could benefit from crowdsourced information allowing them to understand the crisis before and prioritize where their services are needed.

Given this potential for local groups to support the bonds among local communities, especially in the context of a crisis, the question is the following: are there any incentive mechanisms that could be offered by local governments to support community leaders who spend 20 to 60 hours per week managing groups fulfilling a role that is supporting the public interest? Beyond local government, private organizations could also play a critical role in supporting community leaders. An example of a private company working with those groups to promote their impact is CNN "Everybody Heroes," which broadcasted the story of Umra Omar's group Safari Doctor, which brings free healthcare to people living in remote areas of Kenya. For the work of the community leaders behind online communities like Facebook groups to be sustainable, it is critical for public and private entities alike to acknowledge the positive role played by these groups and support the work of their leaders.

## CONCLUSION

*Facebook groups and local Facebook groups specifically are proving to be important tools to unite and empower communities around the world. Local groups run by community leaders like Terri Zee Clayton and Michael Kitchens epitomize the safe, informed, civically-engaged and inclusive communities that Facebook has committed to enabling. In times of crisis, local groups like Sienna Plantation Neighbors and Stolen Stuff Hawaii have demonstrated their ability to serve simultaneously as a real-time communication and disaster response platform. In the hands of leaders like Teri and Michael, these groups have become critical building blocks for fostering communities' resilience. Given what the combination of these volunteer community leaders and local groups has already accomplished, this pairing has clear potential for building stronger ties between local communities and local governments and bolstering communities' civic engagement. However, in order to achieve the potential of local groups in these and other regards, it is critical for the community leaders behind them to receive the recognition and support they need to continue their high-impact efforts.*