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Communicating Uncertainty during a Disaster Event in the Social Media Age

Under the threat of global climate change, people are confronted with increasingly frequent natural disasters. In the past, people used to rely on the information provided by the experts, such as that in the weather forecast, to prepare themselves for the upcoming events. In this traditional mode of risk communication the experts communicate through mass media in a top-down manner, and the information flows linearly in one direction, from the expert to the public. However, as the magnitudes of disasters become more extreme and less predictable, such an establishment is apparently becoming ineffective and unreliable.

Facing the new challenges in communicating uncertainty during a disaster, how does the society adapt? Is it possible to derive a new mode of communication from the new social media experiences? In the disastrous floods brought by Typhoon Morakot in Taiwan, August 2009, we saw the emergence of a new form of bottom-up communication facilitated by the new communication technologies and internet social media. The use of multiple communication tools and channels has resulted in networked communication models in place of the traditional linear communication models. This novel model of communication prompts us to explore the new possibilities of risk communication in the world of increasing uncertainty.