Disasters and the digital citizen

by **Keith Halliday**

YUKONOMIST

Social media is transforming not just how we engage politically or waste our time online, but also how we respond to emergencies.

Back in 1897, when authorities in Dawson City feared a winter of starvation was coming, North West Mounted Police Inspector Constantine could only communicate by word of mouth or by posting notices saying things like "It is almost beyond a possibility that any more food will come into this district. For those who have not laid in a winter's supply to remain here longer is to court death from starvation, or at least a certainty of sickness from scurvy and other troubles."

During the 2021 floods, Yukon governments, community groups and individual citizens communicate via a dizzying number of online platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, email chains, group texts and more. Furthermore, you can check the water levels almost up to the minute in Tagish Lake or Marsh Lake by visiting the webpages of Environment Canada's local water sensors.

Word of Constantine's starvation notice did spread rapidly. You might even say it went viral by the standards of the time. One Dawson storekeeper with little food on his shelves went around Dawson shouting at people to "Flee for your lives!" and "Do you expect to catch grayling all winter?"

But even a hysterical grocery merchant can't match the viral spread of today's online platforms.

One remarkable aspect of this trend is how citizens are increasingly turning to non-government information sources in times of crisis.

In Toronto, for example, huge numbers used the citizen-created Vaccine Hunters Twitter feed or website to find a vaccination appointment. Government agencies struggled to create an online tool so citizens could book an appointment. Torontonians were following Twitter, then bundling the family into the car to zip to some location where Vaccine Hunters showed openings.

Inspector Constantine would have been amazed that a new volunteer group like the people behind Vaccine Hunters could set up a tool used by millions faster than far better funded government health agencies. It would be as if some miners on Bonanza Creek set up sourdough1897.yt to match miners with surplus bacon and sacks of flour to trade with others who had empty caches.

Nor is the flooding the first time this has happened in the Yukon. If you want to go backcountry skiing around White Pass, the best source for recent snow conditions and avalanche reports is the Avalanche Canada app. It contains nearly real-time reports from Avalanche Yukon members travelling in the area, as well as links to forecasts and government weather stations.

Given how much time Constantine and his men spent on dog sleds patrolling areas with no maps or weather forecast, he also would be amazed to see a Yukoner in downtown Whitehorse scrolling through a report about the snow conditions in Fraser Chutes from only a few hours earlier, complete with photos and comments from the citizen reporter.

With disasters from floods in Germany to wildfires in California, Silicon Valley has noticed the opportunity too. More than a few tech industry executives noticed how even official California government firecrews were using social media to communicate and find up to date information. Multiple startups are experimenting with new approaches, trying to be more nimble and user-friendly than government apps and websites.

For example, a startup called Perimeter, inspired by the 2018 wildfires in the Bay area, has tapped investors to start building a platform that hopes to bridge the gap between citizens and government agencies. Citizens can post the latest geo-tagged info, such as a new fire blocking a road, but public-safety agencies are also plugged in. This helps control misinformation and allow emergency planners to head off citizen stampedes in the wrong direction, while also giving them a platform to cut through the noise on Twitter and post maps and instructions directly relevant to people in the area.

These platforms create big opportunities for government agencies, but also big challenges. They can reach people who don't visit government Facebook pages or listen to radio announcements. They can also include maps, photos or other helpful information. But the internet runs 24x7, with citizens posting around the clock, so the volume and timing of information flows is unmanageable with small government communications teams working weekdays 9 to 5.

Here in the Yukon, government can send you a text via the Alert Ready system. The territorial government has a webpage with all the ways you can get emergency information, from the webpage on flood risks to following Yukon Protective Services on Facebook or Twitter. The City of Whitehorse has a Whitehorse Alert program you can register for.

The City of Whitehorse is creatively tapping into private-sector emergency solutions. Instead of using a Canadian government locational system, they are using What3Words. This was invented by a British concert organizer who struggled to find a way to text accurate directions to bands, roadies and caterers for music events, and is now used by companies ranging from Mercedes Benz to the Mongolian post office. The app divides the whole world into squares three metres square and assigns each a unique three-word code. Just enter scowls.strapped.speeches to find Whitehorse City Hall, for example.

Of course, none of this helps much if you don't have a smartphone or are out of range of our limited cellular network. But the opportunity is big. It will be exciting to watch other groups emulate Avalanche Yukon and develop innovative new services that make life in the Yukon far safer than Inspector Constantine ever could have imagined.

Keith Halliday is a Yukon economist and author of the MacBride Museum's Aurore of the Yukon series of historical children's adventure novels. He is a Ma Murray award-winner for best columnist and received the bronze for Outstanding Columnist in the 2019 Canadian Community Newspaper Awards.

Letters

Questions remain about relaxing public health measures

Dear Premier Silver:

I have written to you previously (July 8 and July 15) concerning the proposed relaxation of COVID-19 Public Health Measures and have yet to receive a formal response to the concerns I have raised. (This does not sit well with the democratic notion the governments are required to be responsive to the concerns of citizens.)

This is my third letter about the lifting of public health restrictions and is in response to the announcement that Covid-19 Public Health Measures will be lifted on Aug. 4.

I do not consider the information on this topic given by Richard Mostyn, Minister of Community Services or Dr. Catherine Elliott, Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health to be either convincing or reasonable. Context is always important. The vast majority of Yukon cases (483 of them) have occurred between June 1 and July 23 this year, including four deaths. World wide, it took 15 months for the virus to claim three million lives and only three months to claim the next million. What the Yukon Government has proposed now is contrary to common sense and to the policy laid out in the government document, dated March 2021, A Path Forward: Next Steps. The most striking contradiction is that in March (before the June surge of 483 cases), 40 cases was considered Level 4: Very high risk. Somehow, three months later, 77 cases (active cases as of July 23, 2021) is considered acceptable and "opening up" is the path forward.

Many of the assertions made by Mostyn and Elliott and much of the rhetoric are just that - assertions and rhetoric. Vaccination rates does not make "Yukon one of the safest places in the country" - only vaccination rates PLUS Public Health Measures can attempt to do that. How can Mostyn expect us to believe that the "risk of COVID-19 importation to the Yukon is low" when cases are rising elsewhere, particularly in BC? Across the world, cases are rising and even today (July 23, 2021) Jacinda Ahern has closed New Zealand's bubble with Australia and half of Australia's population is in lockdown. In the U.S., many states have re-instituted mask-wearing and physical distancing because of the increase in cases of the Delta variant.

Yet, here in the Yukon, Mostyn announces that bars and restaurants will return to full capacity with no masks and no physical distancing requirements. On the other hand, limits will still pertain to "social gatherings". This is a mockery. Bars and restaurants are social gatherings and that is where a lot of the exposure notices I read were from. The acting CMOH reported that cases were "stabilizing", yet in the next breath reported that six out of seven cases reported between Tuesday July 20 and Wednesday July 21 (the date of the news conference) were unvaccinated. I assume that this government can do simple math If 80 per cent of eligible Yukoners are vaccinated then 20 per cent are not. In spite of this they are willing to forego simple public health requirements and to open our borders to unvaccinated people from elsewhere in Canada. This makes no sense.

The dropping of public health restrictions (a collective responsibility) is now being sold to us as "personal responsibility". However, personal responsibility is well nigh impossible without access to information. The public generally does not have access to the kind of information needed to make informed decisions. We are not being told how ill people are getting. How many are in hospital, in ICU or medivaced? I have heard that the number of people medivaced has risen to double digits. Is this true? If most of the people who are infected are unvaccinated, why is the government taking this opportunity to remove the only protection the rest of us vaccinated folk have (masking and physical distancing). And what about the strain on the medical system? Why do I and other people I know have to wait for commonplace medical procedures because the hospital has a backlog "due to COVID"? If the press is for a "return to normal", then why isn't your government doing more to help the unvaccinated change their minds? Why should unvaccinated people be allowed into enclosed public spaces without basic public health measures in place to protect the rest of us who are taking responsibility for our own health and the health of the community at large? These are the kinds of hard questions that ministers and health officials need to address in place of ill-considered and vague statements.

Members of the government would do well to re-read the document - A Path Forward: Next Steps paying particular attention to Page 6. Page 6 talks about "modest steps forward", the "critical" importance of public health measures (self-isolation and Safe 6 plus 1), and "open and effective communication". This was only three months ago. The Yukon government has a lot of explaining to do about why it is engaged in this current U-Turn.

Yours sincerely,
Janet Webster

Correcting the record on food production

I would like to submit a correction of my quote in the article "COVID-19 shines light on Yukon's food insecurity issues" published in the July 15th Yukon News.

The quote reads "The Yukon only produces, being generous, about 10 per cent of the foodstuffs it needs to support the population…"

I would like to take this opportunity to correct myself, and to speak briefly on Yukon food production. Our current reports and numbers put Yukon Food Production between one to three per cent of our needs.

The Yukon Government 2020 Yukon Agriculture policy states that "achieving double digit production is seen as an achievable 10-year goal."

We are not there yet! According to the Yukon Agriculture Association, when it comes to calculating food production, most of our numbers are drawn through registered agriculture in terms of the numbers of farms, usable acreage, and annual production/sale reports.

But not all the farmers participate in surveys, and small- scale farmers are often not even contacted even though they may produce quite a bit of food. This also does not account for the gardeners, the berry and mushroom pickers, the hunters and fisherman or people who have a small greenhouse or hens in their backyard. Painting a fully accurate picture of Yukon Food production may be tricky, but we can see across the territory that people care about and recognize the importance of where our food comes from.

With the support of everyday Yukoners as well as the hard work of our dedicated farmers, we are making a difference and will continue to do so.

According to the Yukon Agriculture Policy: "Over the last decade, the total amount of land under cultivation and number of farms in Yukon has grown, along with livestock and vegetable production…In 2016, vegetable and fruit production peaked at a 20-year high in terms of number of acres and farms in production." To participate in the discussion or learn more, please contact us at foodnetworkyukon.ca Thank you for the opportunity to correct the record.

Chris Pinkerton, YE Food Security Network Coordinator – Food Network Yukon