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Communicating in the aftermath of an earthquake: when Twitter proves to be a trustworthy and empathetic information channel.

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Twitter has proved to be a powerful tool for the dissemination of scientific information in the aftermath of a seismic event. During an earthquake crisis, the affected population is in need of rapid, reliable information on what has just happened and what to do next to stay safe. However, it is not rare that reliable earthquake information takes a few minutes to be accessible and shared with the population. This shortcoming can have harmful impact: every time there is a lack of information, rumors fill the void and misinformation spreads. To make matters worse, scientific communication is often jargon-laden and hence perceived as overly technical, inappropriate, and unfeeling. Effective earthquake communication must therefore be:

- rapid and clear, to prevent fake news from spreading;
- transparent, by acknowledging uncertainty if reliable information is not available yet;
- empathetic and compassionate, to decrease anxiety and promote a sense of calming.

In this light, we discuss the communication strategy of @LastQuake, the official Twitter channel (160k followers) of the Euro-Med Seismological Centre. When an earthquake strikes and is felt by the population, real-time information on the seismic event begins to be automatically published via a twitter-robot. These automatic tweets range from easily-accessible scientific information about the earthquake location and magnitude, to the shaking felt by the earthquake eyewitnesses, to the safety guidelines and –where applicable– to tsunami warnings. Our automatic tweets have little or no technical jargon. The Information is primarily accessed by users who are in the midst of responding and possibly traumatized. Hence our words, tone, and images have been carefully chosen to provide competent and appropriate communication. Meanwhile, when necessary, further tweets may be manually published to counter the onset of specific false claims and theories, or to address cultural and situational specific needs.

Our discussion will outline the current @lastquake twitter-bot environment and discuss evidence-based best practices for using Twitter for earthquake crisis communication to avoid misinformation and promote self and community efficacy.