

# Anatomy of Early Stage Emergency Communications

September 8, 2011 Power Outage in California, Arizona and Mexico

## Background

A little before 4 p.m. on Thursday, September 8 a massive power outage occurred in Southern California.

This is a brief analysis of some of the early communications about the event from social media, the media, the utility and government agencies.

At 4:16 the first notice I received was from a LA Times Breaking News alert.

This is an update 6 minutes later.



**Los Angeles Times**

**BREAKING NEWS**

**A massive blackout in Southern California**

*Los Angeles Times | Sept. 8, 2011 | 4:22 p.m.*

Officials are investigating the cause of a massive blackout that left a large swath of San Diego, as well as parts of Orange and Riverside counties without power this afternoon.

More soon at <http://www.latimes.com/>.

I checked Google for stories on San Diego power outage. Went to the San Diego Gas & Electric website. It was down. I kept checking for the next 45 minutes or so. Remained down.



### Unable to connect

Firefox can't establish a connection to the server at [www.sdge.com](http://www.sdge.com).

- The site could be temporarily unavailable or too busy. Try again in a few moments.
- If you are unable to load any pages, check your computer's network connection.
- If your computer or network is protected by a firewall or proxy, make sure that Firefox is permitted to access the Web.

Try Again

Google now had stories about the outage at about 4:30. Links to broadcast channel websites. ABC and NBC affiliates had minimal news. Reported SDG&E had no idea of cause and no idea when it would be restored.

**10NEWS.com** REWARD YOUR SUCCESS GET A DECISION IN 60 SECONDS

**SEARCH**  
 Site  Web  
 Yellow Pages  
 A-List Businesses  
 Search  **GO**  
[SITE MAP »](#)

**San Diego News**  
 National News  
 News Archive  
 Contact 10News  
 10News Team  
 10News To Go  
 E-mail Alerts  
 Get RSS

**NEWS**  
 Home  
**San Diego News**  
 Weather  
 Traffic  
 Investigations  
 Entertainment  
 Staying Healthy  
 Sports  
 Politics  
 Site Contents

**MARKETPLACE**  
 Money  
 At The Movies  
 Contests  
 House And Home  
 Food  
 A-List City Guide  
 Dating  
 San Diego Jobs  
 Real Estate  
 Automotive

**San Diego News**  
**Crews Investigate County-Wide Power Outage**  
 POSTED: 3:46 pm PDT September 8, 2011  
 UPDATED: 4:24 pm PDT September 8, 2011

**SAN DIEGO --** Utility crews are investigating widespread power outages reported throughout the San Diego area.

San Diego Gas & Electric crews are trying to determine the cause of the outage, which has affected various cities around the county, from the South Bay to downtown, to cities in the North County and into areas as far east as El Centro.

SDG&E representatives say they are looking into the issue and currently do not know what caused the outages.

**HISCOX**  
 Reinventing Small Business Insurance™  
[BUY ONLINE NOW](#)  
 COVERAGE FOR PROFESSIONAL SERVICE PROVIDERS

**BREAKING NEWS**  
[+Enlarge](#)

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department officials are urging residents to stay indoors and to limit phone use.

10News learned flights scheduled to leave Lindbergh Field were being grounded due to the outage. However, planes on approach are being allowed to land.

Several viewers from Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside counties have contacted 10News and said they have experienced outages as well.

10News and 10News.com will have more information as this story develops.

[Do you have more information about this story? Click here to contact us](#)

**J.D. POWER PANEL**  
 Earn **free** rewards by giving your opinion  
[Join Now](#)

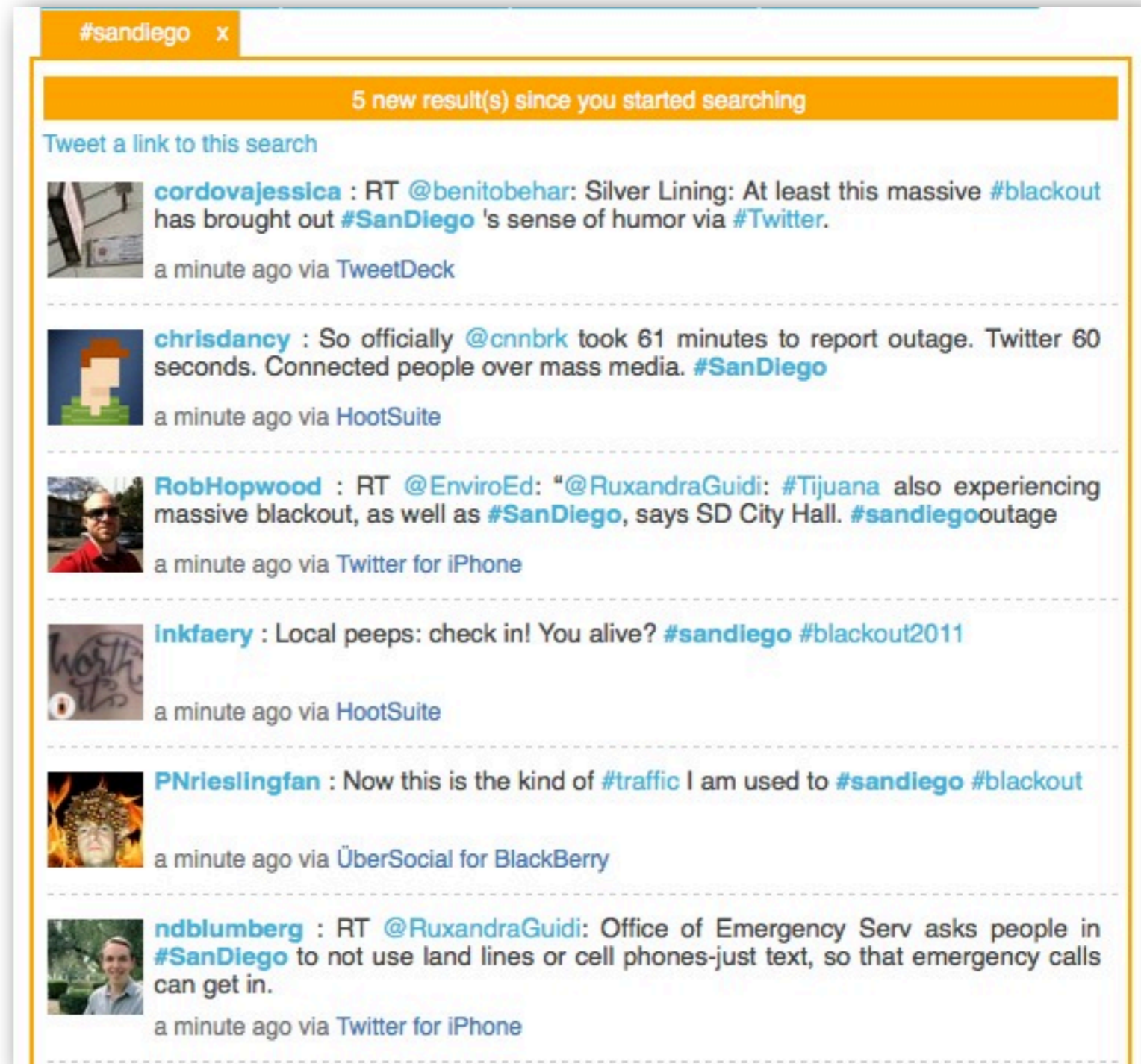
**Share** 528 **16 retweet**

**E-Mail News Alerts**  
 Get breaking news and daily headlines.  
 Enter E-Mail Address  **SUBM**  
[Browse all e-mail newsletters](#)

**Related To Story**

Went to Twitter.  
Started to get some  
info.


Note: notice to not  
use phones. Traffic  
problems. CNN  
Breaking News was  
61 minutes late.





#sandiego x

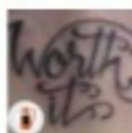
5 new result(s) since you started searching


[Tweet a link to this search](#)


 **cordovajessica** : RT @benitobehar: Silver Lining: At least this massive #blackout has brought out #SanDiego 's sense of humor via #Twitter.  
a minute ago via TweetDeck

 **chrisdancy** : So officially @cnbrk took 61 minutes to report outage. Twitter 60 seconds. Connected people over mass media. #SanDiego  
a minute ago via HootSuite

 **RobHopwood** : RT @EnviroEd: "@RuxandraGuidi: #Tijuana also experiencing massive blackout, as well as #SanDiego, says SD City Hall. #sandiegooutage  
a minute ago via Twitter for iPhone

 **inkfaery** : Local peeps: check in! You alive? #sandiego #blackout2011  
a minute ago via HootSuite

 **PNrieslingfan** : Now this is the kind of #traffic I am used to #sandiego #blackout  
a minute ago via ÜberSocial for BlackBerry

 **ndblumberg** : RT @RuxandraGuidi: Office of Emergency Serv asks people in #SanDiego to not use land lines or cell phones-just text, so that emergency calls can get in.  
a minute ago via Twitter for iPhone

With reference on Twitter to San Diego Emergency Management issuing warnings, I went to their website. No reference to outage at 4:45 p.m.

**San Diego County Emergency Homepage**

Fires Storms Earthquakes Floods Bioterrorism

[Cell Phone Registry for Emergency Alerts](#)

[Cal Fire on Twitter](#)

National Weather Service Forecast  
[Coast](#) [Valleys](#) [Mountains](#) [Desert](#)

**Breaking News Briefs**

8-30-11 10:00 a.m. Mandatory evacuations have been changed to advisory. The Red Cross shelter has been closed. Cal Fire expects to contain the fire by Tuesday evening.

8-29-11 6:00 p.m. The Pala Fire is now 350 acres burning in rugged terrain and heading northeast toward Riverside County. The Sheriff's Department has issued mandatory evacuations to about 80 homes in the Rancho

**News Releases**

**2-1-1 San Diego:**  
**24-hour community, health and disaster information**

**American Red Cross**

4:50 Checked news websites.

Reporting area of outage. Only SDGE customers. No idea of cause or when restored.

Info now coming from non-SDGE sources.

But, they were reporting statements from SDGE. How was SDGE communicating with media?

Communities across San Diego went dark on Thursday afternoon as a power outage plagued parts of the county. Southern parts of Orange County, eastern San Diego and northern Mexico are reportedly out as well.

Power went out throughout the county for all SDG&E customers. All other service providers have power.

No cause has been determined and there is no estimate as to when the problem will be fixed, according to California Independent System Operator.

According to SDG&E officials they are not sure how many homes are without power or how far the reach extends. They later tweeted, "We continue to work on the current power outage and find the cause and solution. We will update you as soon as we know."

Ah yes, SDGE was tweeting. Their first tweet was at 3:52 p.m.--about 14 mins after outage occurred.

I started to follow at about 5 pm.

SDGE reported on upcoming news conference.

**SDG&E** @SDGE San Diego and Orange counties  
San Diego Gas & Electric: Customer Contact Center  
800-411-7343. Here for you, every day.  
<http://www.sdge.com>

Following

You might also want to follow:

- sdchamber** San Diego Chamber · Follow  
The San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce provides a voice for all San Diego b...
- NEUtilities** Northeast Utilities · Follow  
Delivering electricity & natural gas to 2.1 million customers and improving our com...

Get to @SDGE

ots Favorites Following Followers Lists

**SDGE** SDG&E  
This could go into tomorrow in some areas. Keep safety first.  
38 seconds ago

**SDGE** SDG&E  
Both major connections to our region have been lost.  
1 minute ago

**SDGE** SDG&E  
Conference on now. An event happened between AZ and CA.  
2 minutes ago

**SDGE** SDG&E  
We will be hosting a news conference shortly. No exact time yet.  
We will live tweet from the event.  
6 minutes ago

**SDGE** SDG&E  
We continue to work on the current power outage and find the cause and solution. We will update you as soon as we know.  
28 minutes ago



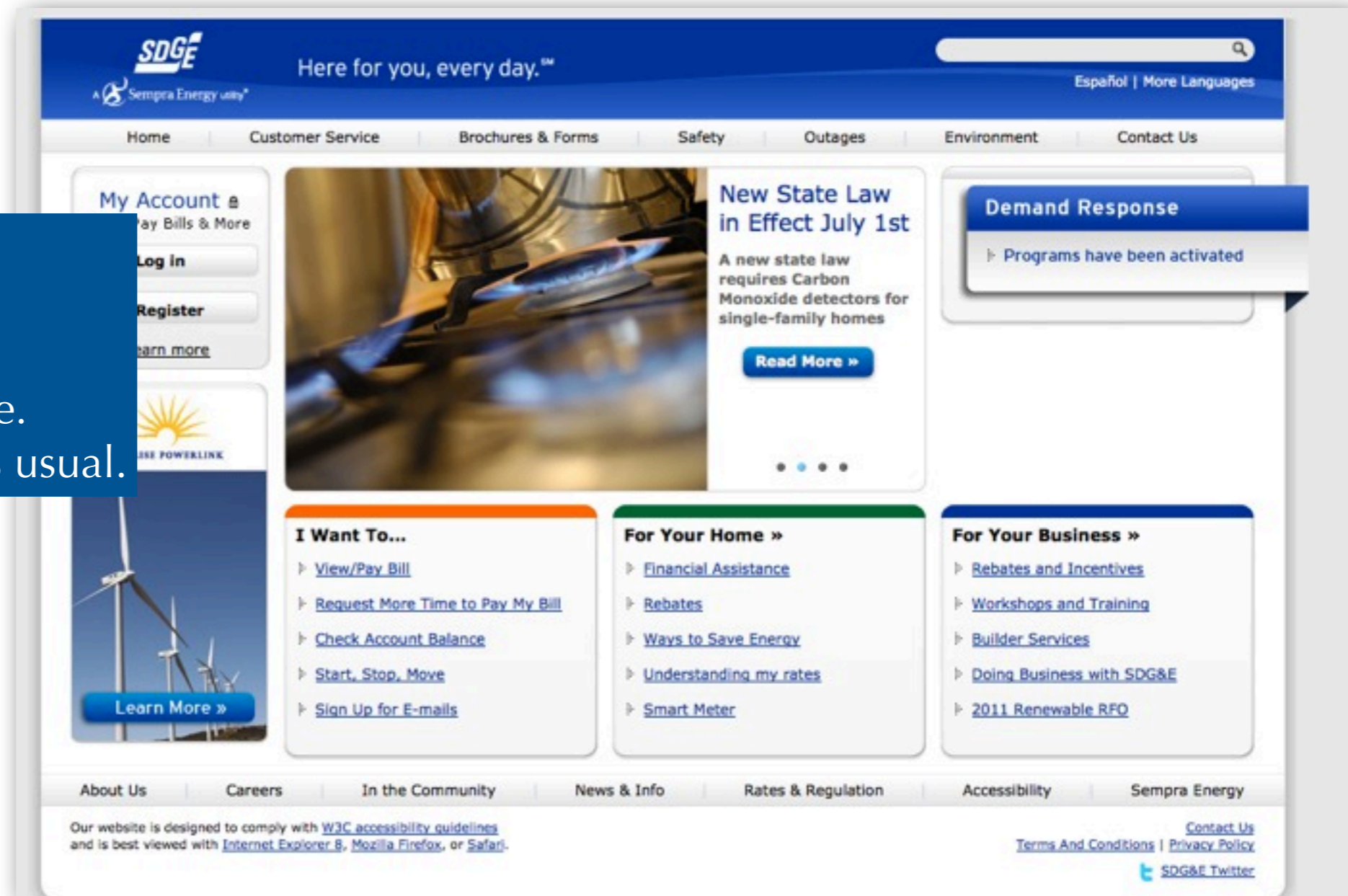
**sirhc** : "@SDGE: We will be hosting a news conference shortly. No exact time yet. We will live tweet from the event." Good, as no one can watch. :-)

2 minutes ago via Twitter for Android

SDGE reports "an event happened between AZ and CA" First indication of cause. May not restore power until tomorrow.

5:04 p.m.

SDGE site finally back up.  
But, no reference to outage.  
Apparently, it's business as usual.



LA Times continues to send breaking news email alerts. This one from 5:25 p.m.

Clearly using SDGE tweets as source.

First reference I noted on CNN with “Breaking News” was about 6:30 p.m. Coverage focused on Obama speech and potential terrorist threat.



24 hour news cycle.

Report of power restored at 4:36 a.m. on September 9.

## Los Angeles Times

**BREAKING NEWS**

### **Power restored to San Diego customers**

*Los Angeles Times | Sept. 9, 2011 | 4:36 a.m.*

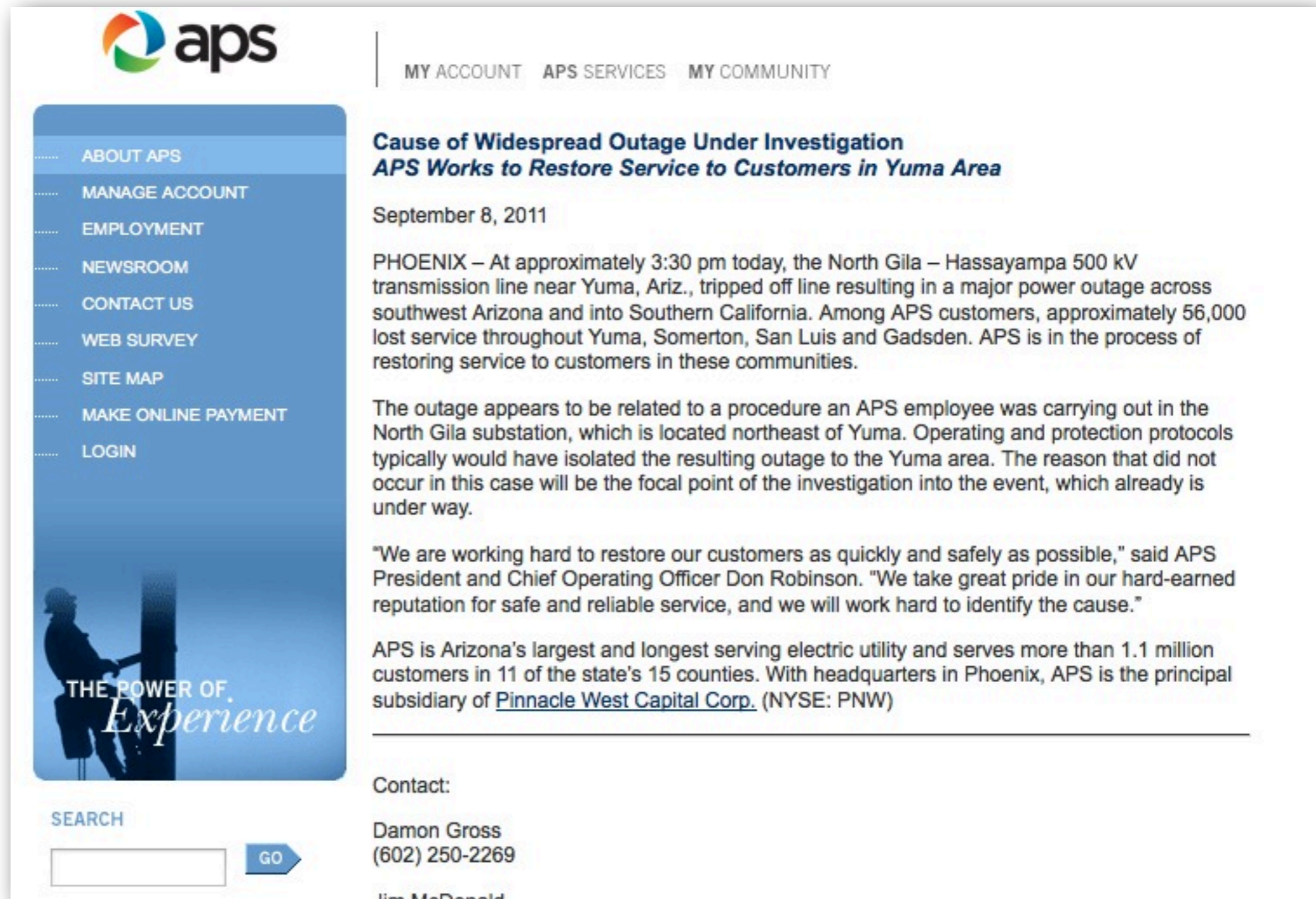
San Diego Gas & Electric Co. says power has been restored to 100% of the 1.4 million customers who lost power Thursday.

More soon at <http://www.latimes.com/>.

APS Message  
announcing cause

No sign of apology  
or empathy for the  
very significant  
problems caused by  
an operator error.

Seeking to minimize  
impact by talking  
only of the 56,000  
Arizona customers.



The screenshot shows the APS website interface. At the top left is the APS logo. To its right are navigation links: MY ACCOUNT, APS SERVICES, and MY COMMUNITY. A blue sidebar on the left contains a menu with the following items: ABOUT APS, MANAGE ACCOUNT, EMPLOYMENT, NEWSROOM, CONTACT US, WEB SURVEY, SITE MAP, MAKE ONLINE PAYMENT, and LOGIN. Below the menu is a blue banner with a silhouette of a worker and the text "THE POWER OF Experience". At the bottom left of the sidebar is a search bar with the word "SEARCH" above it and a "GO" button to its right. The main content area on the right features a news article titled "Cause of Widespread Outage Under Investigation" and "APS Works to Restore Service to Customers in Yuma Area". The article is dated September 8, 2011, and describes a power outage in southwest Arizona and southern California. It includes a quote from APS President Don Robinson and information about APS being a subsidiary of Pinnacle West Capital Corp.

**aps**

MY ACCOUNT APS SERVICES MY COMMUNITY

ABOUT APS  
MANAGE ACCOUNT  
EMPLOYMENT  
NEWSROOM  
CONTACT US  
WEB SURVEY  
SITE MAP  
MAKE ONLINE PAYMENT  
LOGIN

THE POWER OF  
*Experience*

SEARCH

GO

**Cause of Widespread Outage Under Investigation**  
**APS Works to Restore Service to Customers in Yuma Area**

September 8, 2011

PHOENIX – At approximately 3:30 pm today, the North Gila – Hassayampa 500 kV transmission line near Yuma, Ariz., tripped off line resulting in a major power outage across southwest Arizona and into Southern California. Among APS customers, approximately 56,000 lost service throughout Yuma, Somerton, San Luis and Gadsden. APS is in the process of restoring service to customers in these communities.

The outage appears to be related to a procedure an APS employee was carrying out in the North Gila substation, which is located northeast of Yuma. Operating and protection protocols typically would have isolated the resulting outage to the Yuma area. The reason that did not occur in this case will be the focal point of the investigation into the event, which already is under way.

"We are working hard to restore our customers as quickly and safely as possible," said APS President and Chief Operating Officer Don Robinson. "We take great pride in our hard-earned reputation for safe and reliable service, and we will work hard to identify the cause."

APS is Arizona's largest and longest serving electric utility and serves more than 1.1 million customers in 11 of the state's 15 counties. With headquarters in Phoenix, APS is the principal subsidiary of [Pinnacle West Capital Corp.](#) (NYSE: PNW)

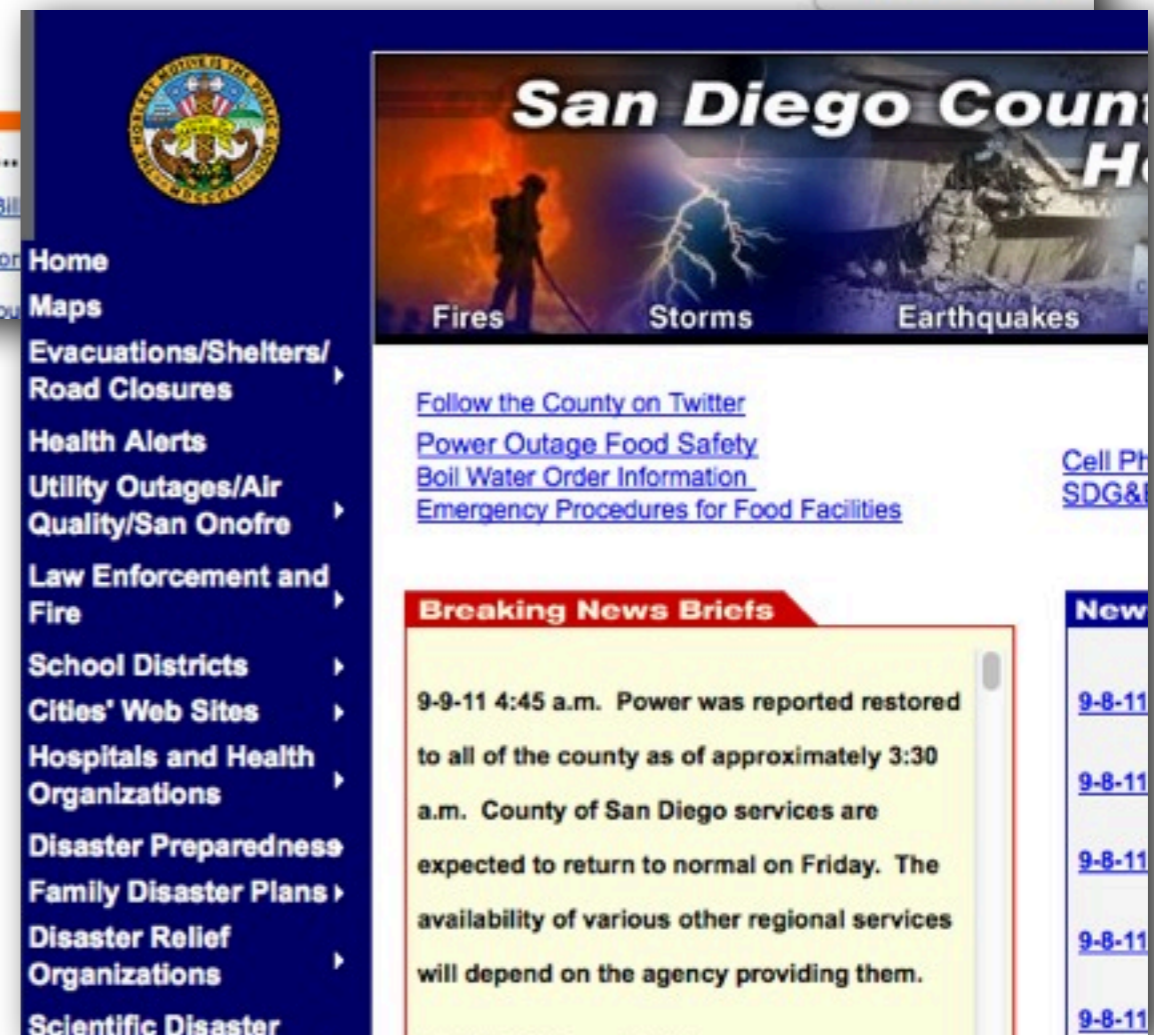
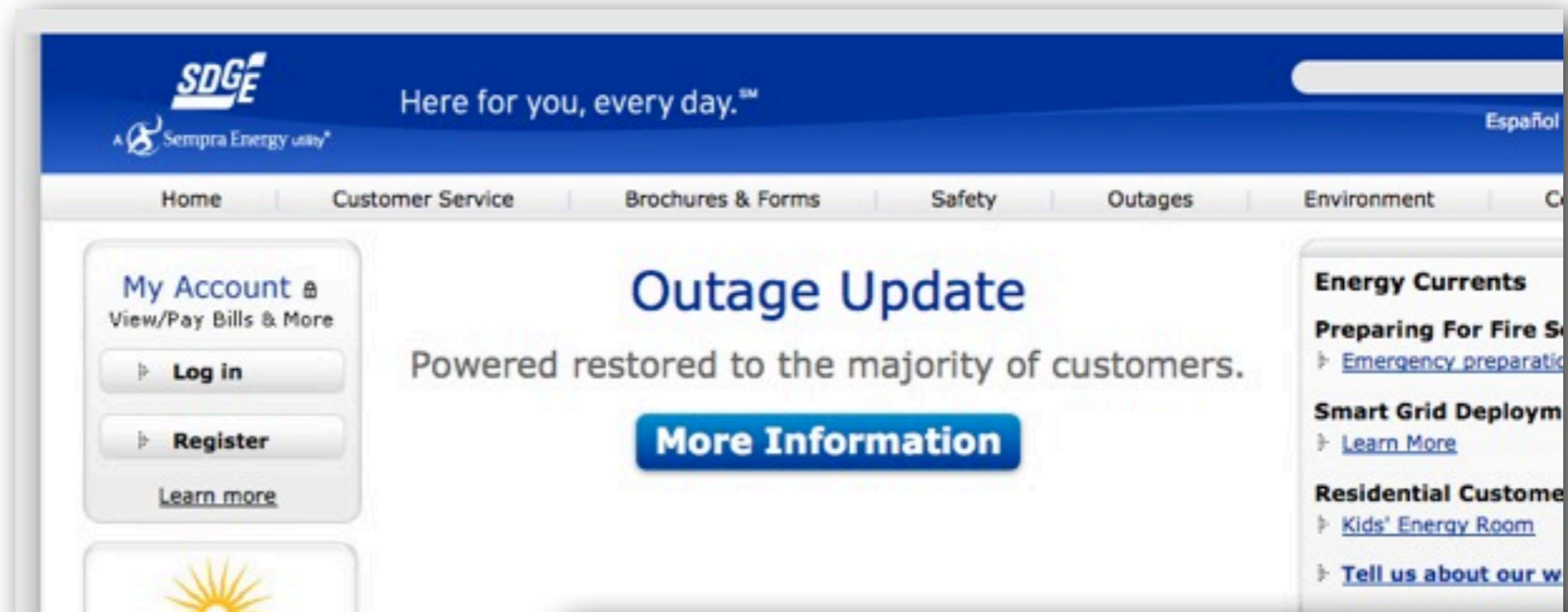
Contact:

Damon Gross  
(602) 250-2269

Jim McDonald

Both SDGE and San Diego Emergency Management now have info updates on their website.

Too little, too late?



## Lessons?

Twitter was most valuable and fastest source of information.

Twitter was the primary means SDGE communicated with the media and customers.

Retweeting is the new broadcasting.

LA Times email alerts are an outstanding source of fast info

Websites from company and agencies far too slow in providing needed info.

SDGE website clearly not built to withstand crises.

SDGE effectively used Twitter with apparently a late start--but what if Twitter went down

Live video broadcasting through web critical for information continuity

The Internet, news websites and social media are **primary** means of communicating in large power outages--access via smartphones recharged by car chargers

We are in the era of “you are the broadcaster”. To be ready, organizations must:

- make sure websites can handle traffic, geo-redundant &
- post information on site fast and continuously
- use live video feeds
- use Twitter and other social media continuously

For goodness sake, if you are going to mess up the lives of 1.4 million folks, tell them you are sorry!