

Issue Brief

Social Media: Emergency Communications' Best Ally



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Social media has become the most popular means of personal communication during the last decade. It connects and informs people quickly – the go-to source for immediate insight. But social media has only come into its own as a powerful tool for information dissemination during disasters in the last couple of years, usually the first stop for media and audiences alike because it is the fastest – although not always the most accurate – way to spread news the furthest.

Certain disasters and emergencies even in our recent past were not featured heavily on social media, given the newness of the medium. There was no social media around during the 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks. Hurricane Katrina in 2005 didn't benefit from social media either. But usage picked up quickly towards the end of the decade. The 2010 earthquake in Haiti put social media into the limelight as a critical emergency management, volunteer recruitment and fundraising tool.

During and after Hurricane Sandy in 2012, users sent more than 20 million Sandy-related Twitter posts, according to FEMA,¹ and during the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, one quarter of Americans searched Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites for information.²

It's a medium whose popularity and efficacy during emergencies will continue to ebb, flow and evolve – but for the foreseeable future, it's a tool no public entity can afford to do without.

During the Oso, Wash., mudslide, Snohomish County used social media extensively to keep the public apprised of ongoing developments and breaking news.

Social Media for Disasters 101

You're a communications professional for a jurisdiction, in charge of providing useful information to the public that keeps them updated on local events, extreme weather, road alerts, policies and pertinent news.

Suddenly, the worst happens: An unexpected disaster strikes and an emergency situation ensues. Community residents could be endangered. How can you get breaking news to them as quickly as possible?

In the old days, you might pick up the phone and call the TV news stations. In even older days, you may have called the newspapers. But today, the swiftest way to reach the public is via social media. Tweet it, post on Facebook, perhaps even Instagram it, and you're bound to reach thousands of people quickly. And because most media outlets follow social media generated by local jurisdictions, you'll be hitting two birds with one stone. Let primary news organizations help you get that story out there.

The following sections in this Center for Digital Government issue brief offer best practices to help government agencies craft a strategy for the effective use of social media during disaster recovery. In part, these suggestions were formed from the experiences of Snohomish County Deputy Director of Communications Bronlea Mishler and her use of social media in response to the Oso mudslide (see sidebar "Social Media and the Oso Mudslide").

Identify a consistent hashtag.

You have a social media emergency communications plan ready for implementation, but before you start launching updates far and wide via social media, there are two very important decisions you must make: What will you name your disaster event hashtag (yes, you must have one), and how will you promote it for swift public consumption?

Utilizing a hashtag in posts, whatever the social media platform you use, will make it easier for the public to search and find your information — and nearly as important, will make it easier for you later on to track the flow of information you sent and received. That's crucial when you have the time to reflect on the effectiveness of your outreach, and absolutely critical should your agency be presented with a Freedom of Information Act request for that data later.

In the case of the Oso mudslide, Mishler was lucky. Just two days prior to the slide, she attended a workshop where a professor from the University of Washington spoke about social media during disasters and the value of using hashtags proactively to track incidents.

When she got the first call about the mudslide, Mishler didn't know the extent of the damage, but went on social media to poke around. She noticed rumors and speculation and since she knew the county would be handling the situation, she decided to hop onto Twitter to provide the information she knew, ask people to keep away from the site and tell them more information would be forthcoming. She hashtagged her post "#530slide."

That initial Tweet was followed by press releases, photos and information on the county's Facebook page, and new pages on the county's website — but it was #530slide that people kept returning to in the days and weeks following the incident. The hashtag remained a valuable tool to help the public find new information — and later, helped the Snohomish County communications team track the effectiveness of their outreach during the emergency.

Jeannette Sutton,³ disaster sociologist and senior research scientist at the University of Colorado, points out that using the right hashtag is just as important as using one at all. As well-utilized as social media was for the Boston Marathon bombing, there was no consistent hashtag on Twitter, making tracking relevant information hard and helping misinformation spread. She points out that without a commonly used hashtag, searching for the word "#Boston" would have fallen short, since it could include unrelated Boston references, like Boston tourism, Boston restaurants or the Boston Bruins. Get the hashtag right from the get-go.

Social Media and the Oso Mudslide

On Saturday, March 22, 2014, at 10:37 a.m. and 10:41 PDT, two mudslides unleashed massive destruction in an unincorporated area four miles east of Oso, Wash. Part of an unstable hill collapsed, sending mud and debris across the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River and inundating the Steelhead Haven residential neighborhood. In all, 43 people were killed and 49 homes were destroyed, making the Oso mudslide the deadliest in U.S. history.

During this emergency situation, Snohomish County used social media extensively to keep the public apprised of ongoing developments and breaking news. Although it was a new practice for the county, it greatly benefited those searching for information, including the media, the general public, peer agencies working on the disaster, and family and friends of Oso residents.



Be the voice of authority.

In a crisis, people want to be reassured. Try to centralize and coordinate information in as few channels as possible to avoid confusion — and make sure those channels are mobile optimized. Focus on the mission, direct the conversation as much as you can and maintain a steady tone in your messaging. Establishing a reliable voice early on can steady and influence the public, which may be frightened, worried or searching for missing loved ones. Your proactive, calm voice of authority on social media will comfort the public, serve you well and also help control the spread of rumors. Remember as you post that, as much as people search social media for situational awareness, they also use it to express their feelings. Be proactive, be responsive and let citizens know their voices are heard. Sometimes all you need to say is, “We don’t have all the answers now, but we promise to get back to you and keep you updated as soon as we know anything.”

Establish a rumor control website.

In the course of any high-profile emergency, rumors and misinformation can populate the Web in no time. Establishing a Snopes-style page where rumors can be quashed and information verified or corrected is vital. During Hurricane Sandy, FEMA established a rumor-control resource (www.fema.gov/hurricane-sandy-rumor-control) to refute rumors about reimbursement, reconstruction and other related information.

After the Oso slide, Mishler watched #530slide closely, finding rumors there that weren't true, such as that everyone was being evacuated, or that a thousand volunteers were needed. She began pushing out different messaging to correct and redirect the conversation in a positive way, such as, “No, we’re not evacuating, we’re just asking people to stay alert. We don’t need volunteers at the site, but here are other ways you can help.”

Divide and conquer with social media tasks.

Many smaller agencies have only a single employee dedicated to managing social media. In the event of a disaster that requires around-the-clock coverage, that person will burn out swiftly without additional help. It's critical to train alternate staff to bolster social media management during such emergencies. Pinch hitters can provide relief, increase monitoring and handle the heavy volume of questions, requests and rumor correction. Appoint one staff member to post updates, another to answer questions from the public and media, another to identify and correct rumors. Finally, dedicate a staff member to run social media analytics after the event to gauge metrics. Taking the team approach will make your outreach and response less burdensome and more effective.

Mishler suggests that if it's possible (and safe), a public information officer could Tweet live from the field with verified information, while another staff member watches the insights on social media platforms to see precisely who is being reached with the messages. Then information can be tailored to those viewing it.

Avoid social media scams.

It's sad but true: Scammers have become adept at using social media to steal money, and the high emotional arcs that emerge during large disasters can make their manipulation even easier.

In 2012, the FBI arrested a woman soliciting money on Facebook who claimed to be a relative of a victim of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. After the Haitian earthquake in 2010, more than \$5 million was donated in 48 hours to the American Red Cross via text message, prompting the FBI to warn that social media had become a great platform for scam artists.

Train staff to recognize these ploys and alert the public to them. Use your informational social media platform to warn citizens to use caution before giving credit card numbers over the phone or online, and to check a charity's legitimacy and tax-exempt status by going to www.guidestar.org.

Implement a social media archiving solution.

It is critical to remember that the impact of a disaster extends far longer than the incident itself. Of all the long-term best practices to develop in the realm of social media emergency management, activating a social media archiving solution is perhaps the most important one. In the furor of a crisis, communications professionals usually don't have time to do much more than cope — but after it passes, public information requests will flood in demanding documentation and records of how the agency handled the situation. Since social media content is subject to public records requests in most states, and because social

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media is often the source of new information during an emergency, these communications constitute important long-term records. For example, during the Boston Marathon bombing, the very first announcement that the suspect had been captured was sent as a Tweet.

Mishler says, "In the moment, you don't have time to think: 'It's Day 2 of this emergency; I haven't slept; I'm completely overwhelmed with things I have to do; and I also have to create PDFs or screen shots of every Tweet I've ever sent.'"

Snohomish County was fortunate to have established a social media archiving solution nearly a year in advance of the landslide disaster, and had opted to create an "open archive" (available at <http://snoco.wa.gov.archivesocial.com>) for the public to search and access. The county has since received more than 40 public information requests related to the landslide, and for the requests applicable to social media content, can direct the public to the open archive.

It is also valuable to conduct a retrospective to see what social media efforts worked, what didn't, and use those experiences to improve strategies and establish best practices. To do that, you need a solid archiving solution that tracks, updates and retains everything you generate and the responses you receive. With Snohomish County's open archive, it is easy to replay the exact communications that transpired — beginning with the very first Tweet tagged "#530slide."

"If at any time we have to pull together anything related to the slide, we have the ability to do that," says Mishler. "If somebody were to request all the data and metadata for every single Tweet and Facebook post, I don't have to pull my Twitter archive or scroll through all my Facebook posts — I can just go back and export it all into a format that's useful. I don't have to think about it because I know it's constantly being archived and updated. I know that it's handled."

The Peace of Mind of Being Prepared

Drawing up an effective social media strategy ahead of the game and modifying it as needed is critical to preparedness planning. Outside of the best practices mentioned previously, here are some components of a basic social media plan to consider to ensure your agency is prepared for whatever comes its way.

- **Organizational Mission:** Describe your agency's work in a few simple sentences — and keep it as your focus.
- **Roles and Responsibilities:** As communicators in this crisis, you'll be involved in information sharing, fact checking and managing communication channels. Assign roles to your immediate teams and affiliated departments or agencies so everyone knows who does what.
- **Audiences:** Who do you want to target when distributing information? Constituents, stakeholder groups, peer agencies in or near your jurisdiction?
- **Social Media Channels:** Facebook, Twitter, Reddit ... pick the avenues that will best serve you as a widespread disseminator of public information. Lead on social media and follow with a press release or more information on your website.
- **Metrics:** After the crisis has passed, measure the effectiveness of your public engagement via social media analytics.

A snapshot of one of the first tweets about the Oso mudslide from Snohomish County's archiving solution.



SOURCE: [HTTP://SNOCO.WA.GOV.ARCHIVESOCIAL.COM](http://snoco.wa.gov.archivesocial.com)

Endnotes

1. www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/32509
2. www.usatoday.com/story/news/2013/04/23/social-media-boston-marathon-bombings/2106701/
3. <http://news.yahoo.com/social-media-changing-disaster-response-211500734.html>

Underwritten by:



Sample an archive of your own social media at archivesocial.com