Using Social Media for Emergency Notifications

Seven Questions for Emergency Managers to Consider
Impact of Social Media on Emergency Notifications

Not long ago, the only way emergency managers could alert the public about emergency events was through sirens, radio and television. The amount of time to reach the public could often delay breaking news as events occurred. Emergency managers were not assured that everyone in affected areas had been contacted. With alerts going out only in one direction, it wasn’t possible for emergency managers to be able to quickly assess and gauge the public’s safety and well-being during those events.

Since the advent of the Internet and rapid adoption of mobile technologies such as smartphones, the public has adopted social media at a dizzying pace. Social media is another tool in the tool box for rapid emergency notification, giving emergency managers the capability of a real-time way to send urgent notifications through powerful 2-way interactions that facilitate a way for everyone to read, respond to and share the information with anyone, all within seconds.

The ability to quickly reach such a wide and diverse audience and establish dynamic two-way communications during events was unimaginable only a few years ago. How can decision makers associated with crisis communications effectively understand and employ possible uses of social media for their emergency notification needs? How can government and community agencies, schools, and businesses that already have emergency notification services be able to incorporate social media with other types of alerts?

Here are seven important questions that emergency managers need to consider when assessing the use of social media for crisis communications. Although there are a wide range of social media tools, this article is focused on Facebook and Twitter, by far the most popular social media applications today.

“A little thing called ‘social media’ continues to take hold within emergency management. Today, responder agencies are just beginning to Tweet and establish Facebook pages to alert citizens. In the next year, we will see agencies begin to experiment with ways to utilize social media for broader alerting and situational awareness purposes. New tools for analyzing social media streams will likely emerge.”

Top 10 Alert & Warning Predictions for 2011
1. What is Social Media?

There are hundreds of definitions of social media. Beginning with the definition found in Wikipedia: Wikipedia’s definition is: “Social media is a medium for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques. Social media is the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue.”

Anthony Bradley of the Gartner Group describes social media as follows: “Social media is a set of technologies and channels targeted at forming and enabling a potentially massive community of participants to productively collaborate. Social media has the six core characteristics of participative, collective, transparent, independent, persistent, and emergent that delivers the unique value of social-media and, in combination, set social media apart from other forms of communication and collaboration.”¹ Today, the most widely known and popular social media sites are Twitter and Facebook.

Twitter is a free social networking microblogging service that allows registered members to broadcast short posts called tweets. Twitter members can broadcast tweets and follow other users’ tweets by using multiple platforms and devices. Tweets and replies to tweets can be sent by cell phone text message, desktop client or by posting at the Twitter.com website.

The default settings for Twitter are public. Unlike Facebook or LinkedIn, where members need to approve social connections, anyone can follow anyone on public Twitter. To weave tweets into a conversation thread or connect them to a general topic, members can add hashtags to a keyword in their post. The hashtag, which acts like a meta tag, is expressed as #keyword.

Tweets, which may include hyperlinks, are limited to 140 characters, due to the constraints of Twitter’s Short Message Service (SMS) delivery system. Because tweets can be delivered to followers in real time, they might seem like instant messages to the novice user. But unlike IMs that disappear when the user closes the application, tweets are also posted on the Twitter website. They are permanent, they are searchable and they are public. Anyone can search tweets on Twitter, whether they are a member or not².

Facebook is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. The site, which is available in 37 different languages, includes public features such as:

- Marketplace - allows members to post, read and respond to classified ads.
- Groups - allows members who have common interests to find each other and interact.

² Source: http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/twitter.html
• Events - allows members to publicize an event, invite guests and track who plans to attend.
• Pages - allows members to create and promote a public page built around a specific topic.
• Presence technology - allows members to see which contacts are online and chat.

Within each member's personal profile, there are several key networking components. The most popular is arguably the Wall, which is essentially a virtual bulletin board. Messages left on a member's Wall can be text, video or photos. Another popular component is the virtual Photo Album. Photos can be uploaded from the desktop or directly from a cell phone camera. There is no limitation on quantity, but Facebook staff will remove inappropriate or copyrighted images. An interactive album feature allows the member's contacts (who are generically called "friends") to comment on each other's photos and identify (tag) people in the photos. Another popular profile component is Status Updates, a microblogging feature that allows members to broadcast short Twitter-like announcements to their friends. All interactions are published in a news feed, which is distributed in real-time to the member's friends.3

2. Why Should You Consider Using Social Media?

Popularity of Twitter and Facebook
The number of Twitter and Facebook users has increased dramatically in just 1 year. (Source: econsultancy.com)

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<th>March 2010</th>
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<td>Twitter</td>
<td>75 million</td>
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<td>Facebook</td>
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Many Government Agencies Have Adopted Social Media
Many government agencies have started using Twitter and Facebook with good results. Here are a few representative samples:

Facebook
• San Diego, CA
• Collierville, TN Police Department
• West Memphis Fire Department
• Frankfort, KY

3 Source: http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/facebook.html
Twitter

- Santa Clara, CA
- San Diego, CA
- Ohio State University

**FEMA Uses Social Media** – FEMA maintains an active presence on **Twitter**, as does its administrator, Craig Fugate, and both have been pumping out messages since deadly tornadoes ripped through Tuscaloosa, Ala., and Joplin, Mo., in recent weeks. According to **OhMyGov Media Monitoring**, FEMA's main Twitter feed is currently the tenth most popular account among large federal agencies, with nearly 48,000 followers as of today.

**Facebook Distributes Amber Alerts** – The AMBER (America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Alert System was created in 2003, in Amber Hagerman's name, to quickly distribute information and galvanize community assistance in the search and safe recovery of a recently abducted child. Originally, the AMBER Alert System’s broadcast mechanism was the Emergency Alert System, which is used for weather and other public emergency announcements. Then, **AMBER Alerts** were also disseminated by transportation agencies and wireless providers. Now, Facebook, arguably the most popular communication network in the world, will also distribute AMBER Alerts. In his article, “Facebook to Broadcast AMBER Alerts for Abducted Children”, Jim Puzzanghera’s quotes president of the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Ernie Allen, “With more than 500 million Facebook users, this bold initiative will help us mobilize many more people and bring more missing children home.”

3. **Is Social Media Effective?**

As social media continues to evolve and reach more and more of the population, evidence has shown social media to be a very effective and powerful method to reach the public about urgent warnings and emergencies. Instantaneous posts to Facebook and Twitter can be read, responded to and shared with others, all within seconds. No special skills are required to use these systems. And, there is no cost whatsoever to use these tools.

On April 3, 2011, unusually strong straight-line winds pummeled Collierville, Tennessee. Tamara Springfield was sitting in her Amelia Cove kitchen when she received a severe weather notification from **AlertCollierville**, Collierville's emergency notification system. Tamara and her family quickly moved to a safe part of their home. Fifteen minutes later a tree came through their roof, inches from where Tamara had been sitting when she received the alert. Thrilled with AlertCollierville, Tamara posted a message on the
Collierville Police Department Facebook page saying “Thank you for your reverse 911 system. We had a tree come down on our house this morning but because of the 911 call, everyone, including our animals, was in the center of the house away from windows and none of us were hurt. I have no words for how thankful I am.”

Recent natural disasters include the floods in Memphis, Tennessee; the swath of tornadoes in the southern U.S.; the tsunami in Japan; and the earthquake in Haiti. Social media used during these events demonstrated dramatic and positive results when both the public and emergency agencies quickly facilitated efforts to communicate with and to help each other throughout the crises. With its real-time messaging, dynamic reporting about events by the public and agencies alike, it demonstrated to the world, a collaborative and dynamic way of communicating, never seen before in the past.

4. Is Social Media Reliable?

The use of social media proved to be dramatically effective during the recent natural disasters described above. Social media permitted both emergency managers and the public to share and collaborate in real-time during events resulting in a true social network able to help those in need.

However, there are some caveats that emergency managers need to be aware of when considering social media for crisis notifications.

**Pros**

- Real-time and interactive
- Easy to use
- Reach large masses of people through proactive sharing of information
- Large adoption worldwide
- Cost-effective

**Cons**

- Social media requires a small time commitment in order to keep the content fresh and to stay current.
Cons

• It’s very important that an agency appoint someone to closely monitor the agency’s social media pages – answer questions, squash rumors, monitor what is being said and by whom.

• Not everyone is following your agency nor aware of your social media presence.

• Messages, once posted, can be hard to control. Unverified messages and control and could cause the public to panic.

• Invalid messages could seriously impact the credibility of the emergency agency. The public may not know they are reading fake messages that are not from your agency thus seriously affecting your agency’s credibility. The loss of authority could put the public at danger.

• Performance can be compromised. There is potential for downtime in the case of extremely high volume. Getting back online may take hours or even days. This could seriously impact the safety of the public.

• Cannot reach everyone. Not all areas have Internet availability. Demographics show that the majority of Facebook users in the U.S. are between the ages of 24 and 35⁴, and that the majority of Twitter users are between the ages of 18 and 49⁵.

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5. How Do You Set Up and Manage Your Social Media Account?

It is easy to set up Twitter and Facebook accounts. And, best of all, it is free.

Twitter

All new users set up Twitter accounts at http://twitter.com. Once an account is created, users are given a home page and a profile page. Agencies can set up their Twitter account to follow other accounts such as FEMA, Weather, etc. After getting a Twitter account, providing details on the signup form, users build connections based upon interest. For example, search for big name players in your industry. Setting up Twitter page for business and running it should be no hassle at all. Here is how to go about it⁶.

1. Sign up.
2. Get the settings right.

   It is essential that your profile reflects your agency’s pertinent information such as name, web address, a short biography that clearly describes what your agency is all

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⁴ Source: http://www.checkfacebook.com
⁶ Source: http://www.netrostar.com/Article-217-How%20to%20set%20up%20a%20Twitter%20page%20for%20business
about. The reason this information is important is that others see your agency’s Twitter page and the other reason is that it is used to process search queries in the Twitter service so that you are assured of being described accurately.

3. Customize your Twitter page with visual appeal.

4. Participate.
   You can update the audience about what is happening in your agency and build relationships with other Twitter users such as citizens and any emergency management-related users. The search engine provides a means in which you can look for and monitor any keywords you are interested in.

Facebook

Agencies and businesses set up a “Page” in Facebook. It can contain an overview of the agency, website and contact information, press releases, videos, blog RSS, Twitter updates, company news and status and citizen interaction. One of the major benefits of having a Page is that it is simple, easy to update and does not require technical help.

Promoting a Facebook Page means the public is invited to become “fans” of the Page. Promoting your Facebook Page can be done in a variety of ways including putting a Facebook Page button on your agency’s website, spreading the word via Twitter, sending out email notification or putting your link on business cards.

Keep Information Fresh

Once an emergency agency has established accounts with Facebook and Twitter, keeping the agency’s presence current involves regular updates and monitoring of these sites. It is essential for emergency managers to keep their sites updated with relevant information, even during quiet times.

Once a Facebook page or a Twitter account has been established, emergency managers need to communicate these social media sites to the public so that the public will follow them. When messages are released, emergency managers need to realize they cannot always control the sudden influx of information provided by the community. The community wants to have immediate access to breaking news as they occur.
6. What Happens With Your Current System?

It is important to understand that social media is simply another messaging channel to reach the public. And, that the public consists of citizens of all ages, young and old; urban and remote; wired and unplugged. Therefore messaging to the public still requires the use of traditional notification channels such as telephones, cell phones, text messaging, email, digital signs, sirens, fax and TTY.

It is essential that agencies still have all the resources at hand to deliver information about events as they unfold. It is not to say that today’s environment will never change but until it is assured that messages will reach everyone, the more traditional methods still need to be retained.

Be sure to ask your current or potential emergency notification vendor if social media messaging can be included with emergency alerts. The flexibility to establish messaging across multiple channels from the same source helps the public to receive reliable and consistent messaging from the emergency management agencies.

7. What Is the Future of Social Media?

Social media is still in its infancy. As the playing field becomes more sophisticated, the more popular sites come out ahead. Today, Facebook and Twitter are used by a very large and diverse population. This user base is available to every agency, large and small.

Enhancements of existing systems along with the introduction of new social media applications will connect the world together even more than we are now. The increasing and ubiquitous presence of Internet-enabled smartphones, tablet computers, television and radio, will all contribute to the evolution of social media tools to become a major communication vehicle for the world to deliver, share and participate about events.
Three Social Media Steps to Take Today

1. **Start Participating** - Set up a Twitter and a Facebook account.

2. **Build a Following** - Follow local media and citizens on Twitter and they will follow you back. Over time you will build a sizeable Twitter audience. Same on Facebook. For more tips simply Google “how to build a social media following.”

3. **Start Listening** - In a world deeply integrated with the Internet and social media, conversations that are happening at this very moment can be as easy as setting up a Google Alert for your agency name, city name or county name. Google Alerts will notify you each time your name is mentioned online.

Twenty First Century Communications (TFCC) is a technology company that helps organizations like yours quickly send high volumes of information to the right people, at the right time, using any communication device including social media. With the TFCC Alert emergency notification system, government, corporate, utility, education and healthcare clients can send targeted messages to select groups or geographic areas by landline, cell phone, VoIP phone, PDA, pager, text, email, fax and TTY/TDD machines. The system also integrates with Twitter, which will give clients greater reach in fewer steps.

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