**Interagency Lessons Learned on Using Social Media on Wildland Fire Incidents**

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**Introduction**

Social media is content created by people using highly accessible Internet based publishing technologies. Social media software tools allow groups to generate content and engage in peer-to-peer conversations and exchange of content (examples are Blogger, Twitter, Wikispaces, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, etc.)

The decision to utilize social media technology is a business decision, not a technology-based decision. It must be made at the appropriate level for each incident, considering its mission, objectives, capabilities, and potential benefits. The goal is not to say “No” to social media websites and block them, but to say “Yes”, with effective and appropriate information assurance, security, and privacy controls.

The purpose of this document is to provide information on structured use of social media on incidents. If you are working on an incident and creating or contributing to blogs, microblogs, wikis, social networks, virtual worlds, or any other kind of social media, these lessons might help. These lessons will evolve as new technologies and social networking tools emerge. The decision to use social media on incidents will be made in accordance with the needs of the agency administrator, your particular fire and community, and your team.

## **Engagement**

Emerging platforms for online collaboration are changing the way we work, and offer new ways to engage with customers, colleagues, and the world at large. It is a new model for interaction and social computing that can help build stronger, more successful relationships. It is a way for incident personnel to take part in local, national and global conversations related to their work.

Some things to think about:

* Care should be taken to present accurate official information. Use of official agency logos is discouraged. Instead, consider using the interagency, Official Fire Information logo, shown on APPENDIX C at the end of this document. This JPG can be used as the avatar for any social media sites and reinforced by use on bulletin boards and even letterhead for press releases.
* Ensure that participation and representation on social media sites, in whatever “official” form you choose, is sanctioned by whomever you’re working for.
* Stick to your area of expertise and provide unique, individual perspectives on what is going on with the incident.
* Follow the accepted “PIO” guidelines already in place in regard to press releases and media on incidents. Social Media is not an excuse to NOT do what we’ve been trained to do. Discuss only those issues which pertain to your incident and community with media and the public, and refer national issues to the national office.
* Post meaningful, respectful comments, no spam, and no remarks that are off-topic or offensive.
* Pause and think before posting. Reply to comments in a timely manner, when a response is appropriate. Respond to: inaccurate information on critical information like evacuations. Do not respond to: critics who merely want a public argument.
* Be careful to check your post: is it going to the right audience? Is the spelling correct? Did you mean it to be sent to everyone or a specific person? It’s embarrassing to send a private message to everyone!
* Respect proprietary information, content, and confidentiality.
* When disagreeing with others' opinions, keep it appropriate and polite.
* Social media collaboration tools should be part of your Communication Strategy at your specific incident.
* Use whatever tools you may be familiar with that will meet your strategic goals

**Lessons About Engagement**

**Transparency**. Your honesty will be quickly noticed in the social media environment. If you are blogging about your work on the incident, use your real name, identify that you work for the incident and be clear about your role. If you have a vested interest in something you are discussing, be the first to point it out.

**Judicious**. Make sure your efforts to be transparent do not violate local, State or Federal policies on privacy, confidentiality, and any applicable legal guidelines for external communication. All statements must be true and not misleading and, as you would for a press release, information should be vetted by an appropriate source. Never comment on anything related to legal matters or litigation, without the appropriate approval. If you want to write about other government entities, make sure you know what you are talking about and that you have any needed permissions. Be smart about protecting yourself, your privacy, and any sensitive or restricted confidential and sensitive information. What is published is widely accessible, not easily retractable, and will be around for a long time, so consider the content carefully.

**Knowledgeable**. Make sure you write and post about your areas of expertise, especially as related to the Incident and your assignments. If you are writing about a topic that the team, forest or incident is involved with, but on which topic you are not an expert, you should make this clear to your readers. Write in the first person. It’s a good idea to add information to the site letting people know that disrespectful, racist, sexual or defamatory posts will be removed. Here is one example: “*We are in no way associated with Facebook and this page is our way to share information with the public. Please do not use this page for promoting any content that will be harmful to anyone. Personal attacks, defamation, harassment, spam, offensive content, aggressive behavior, Illegal activities, etc, will not be tolerated and the user will be banned from our end. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but please respect the views and opinions of other members and users of our page.* Respect brand, trademark, copyright, fair use, disclosure of processes and methodologies, confidentiality, and financial disclosure laws. If you have any questions about these, see the lead PIO or Incident Commander. Remember, you are personally responsible for your content.

**Perception**. In online social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred. By identifying yourself as an incident responder, you are creating perceptions about your expertise, about the incident and about the lead agency by legislative stakeholders, customers, business partners and the general public, and perceptions about you by your colleagues and managers. Be sure that all content associated with you is consistent with your work and your values and professional standards.

**Conversational**. Talk to your readers like you would talk to people in professional situations. Avoid overly "composed" language. Bring in your own personality and say what is on your mind. Consider content that is open-ended and invites response. Encourage comments. Broaden the conversation by citing others who are commenting about the same topic and allowing your content to be shared or syndicated.

**Excitement**. All incident personnel make important contributions to agencies, states, the nation, to the future of incident management, and to public dialogue on a broad range of issues. Activities are focused on providing risk-based and innovative incident management. Share with the participants the things we are learning and doing and open up social media channels to learn from others.

**Value**. There is a lot of written content in the social media environment. The best way to get yours read is to write things that people will value. Social communication from every incident should help citizens, partners, stakeholders and co-workers. It should be thought-provoking and build a sense of community. If it helps people improve knowledge or skills, protect their businesses, do their jobs, solve problems, or understand the incident or agency better, then it is adding value.

**Leadership**. There can be a fine line between healthy debate and incendiary reaction. It is not necessary to respond to every criticism or barb. Frame what you write to invite differing points of view without inflaming others. Some topics, like politics, slide easily into sensitive territory. Remember to stick with what you know and are doing locally on your incident and refer national subjects and questions, whether from local or national media, local elected officials, citizens,or other audiences to the national office. Be careful and considerate with people’s opinions as emotions run high in times of crisis. Once the words are out there, you cannot get them back. Once an inflammatory discussion gets going, it is hard to stop. Be cognizant that incidents can serve as a platform for those who have disagreements with government, incident management or their local agency. Do not engage in public arguments with such groups or persons – rather find a private way to engage in an open discussion.

**Responsibility**. What you write is ultimately your responsibility. Participation in social computing on behalf of your incident is not a right but a responsibility. You are as accountable for what you say on a social media platform, as you are on any other platform used by the incident or agency. Remember that everything you say, on any Social Media platform during an incident, is susceptible to the Freedom of Information Act. Only say things you are willing to defend in court.

**Pause**. If you are about to publish something that makes you even the slightest bit uncomfortable, do not post the statement. Take a minute to review and try to figure out what is bothering you, then fix it. If you are still unsure, you might want to discuss it with your supervisor, the Incident Commander or the source of the information. Ultimately, what you publish is yours, as is the responsibility, and any possible repercussions.

**Mistakes**. If you make a mistake, admit it. Be up front and be quick with your correction. If you are posting to a blog, you may choose to modify an earlier post. Make it clear that you have done so. Before you send that message be sure it’s set to go out through the correct account, as a general message, direct message or a reply.

**Moderating Comments**

In some social media formats such as Facebook(FB), Blogs, Twitter responses, etc., you may encounter comments which cause you concern as a moderator or responsible party. If user content is positive or negative and in context to the conversation, then the content should be allowed to remain, regardless of whether it is favorable or unfavorable to the incident or an agency. If one person has the concern, it’s likely others do as well. Better to address the subject quickly and accurately and in public, than allow the conversation to go on over backyard fences. If the content has inaccurate facts about important emergency information like evacuations, destruction of property, injuries or fatalities, correct it at once. If the content is ugly, offensive, denigrating and completely out of context, then the content should be rejected and removed. It’s fairly simple to redirect a bothersome troublemaker to a discussion that is NOT on your FB page. Invite them to call you and give your phone number, direct message them on Twitter, or ask them to come to camp for a tour and to talk with Operations directly.

**Attribution**

Portions of these guidelines have been adapted from Intel’s *Social Media Guidelines*.

**Other References**

*For more on SM Protocols: DHS VSMWG Social Media Strategies,* [*http://www.nifc.gov/PIO\_bb/social\_media.html*](http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/social_media.html)

*GSA Social Media Handbook, http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/staffoffices/socialmediahandbook.pdf*

*GSA Social Media Policy, http://www.gsa.gov/graphics/staffoffices/socialmediapolicy.pdf*

*IBM Social Media Guidelines, http://www.ibm.com/blogs/zz/en/guidelines.html*

*Intel Social Media Guidelines, http://www.intel.com/sites/sitewide/en\_US/social-media.htm*

*Social Media and Web 2.0 in Government, http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/other\_tech.shtml*

*Web 2.0 Governance Policies and Best Practices*, <http://govsocmed.pbworks.com/Web-2-0-Governance-Policies-and-Best-Practices>

**Social Media Tools for Incidents**

While there are many Social Media tools available and in development for use, this is a list of those that have proven useful as part of working on an incident. These internet collaboration tools identify environments that can be commonly incorporated into websites and that provide additional functionality. All of the tools are available at no charge for basic services and are generally considered to be best of class tools. The package of tools you use should obviously be modified as needed to meet the situation. If you have familiarity with a tool that will assist in the mission, feel free to use it as well, after discussion with your supervisor. However, remember, tools should not be used just because you can. Every tool used should meet specific objectives spelled out in the communications strategy. Like all incident communications, social media use should be mission-driven, not technology-driven.

**Listening Tools**

Google accounts [www.google.com/accounts](http://www.google.com/accounts)

Google blog search <http://blogsearch.google.com/>

Google news search <http://news.google.com/>

Google alerts <http://www.google.com/alerts>

Icerocket <http://www.icerocket.com/>

Technorati <http://technorati.com/>

Addictomatic <http://addictomatic.com/>

Twitter search <http://search.twitter.com/>

Monitter <http://www.monitter.com/>

Twitterfall <http://www.twitterfall.com>

Tweetgrid <http://www.tweetgrid.com>

**Aggregator**

Google Reader <http://reader.google.com>

**Microblog** <http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/microblogging.shtml>

<http://bethkanter.wikispaces.com/twitter_primer#tips>

Twitter <http://twitter.com>

**Blog** <http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/blogs.shtml>

Blogger <http://www.blogger.com/home>

**Wikis** <http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/technology/wikis.shtml>

WikiSpaces  <http://www.wikispaces.net>

**Social Networking**

Facebook http://[www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

**Photo hosting**

Twitpic <http://twitpic.com>

**Flickr** [**http://flickr.com**](http://flickr.com)

**Management**

Tweetdeck [www.tweetdeck.com](http://www.tweetdeck.com) (Desktop Application)

HootSuite <http://hootsuite.com> (Web Based)

Ubertwitter [www.ubertwitter.com](http://www.ubertwitter.com) (Blackberry)

**Video Sharing**

YouTube <http://youtube.com>

**Analytics**

Twitter analyzer <http://twitteranalyzer.com/>

TweetStats <http://tweetsats.com>

Twitalizer <http://twitalizer.com>

**Other Twitter Tools**

TwitDoc <http://twitdoc.com> (Shares Documents)

*This will take a PDF, word doc and other documents, as well as photos and movies and tweet them on your behalf. Makes it clean so the end user doesn’t have to download the document.*

TwitLonger <http://twittlonger.com> (More that 140 characters)

*If you have a document or a lot of text you want to send, copy and paste here and it’ll send out 120 characters plus a link to the rest.*

TweetVid <http://TweetVid.com>

*You can upload a video and it will send it out via Twitter. Very similar to twitpic.*

Twazzup <http://www.twazzup.com/>

*This is a tool that lets you see what URL’s people are retweeting without having to open them. This way you can see where most of the retweeting is pointing people – to your site, to a newspaper or to a detractor.*

Backtweets <http://backtweets.com/>

*This is a very useful analytic tool. If you post a press release in Inciweb, for instance, you can grab the URL, put it in backtweets, and it will show you every single person who has retweeted the URL to your release. Very helpful for seeing/proving the distance you have gotten with social media.*

Trendsmap <http://trendsmap.com/>

*This is a fun and usually useful gadget. Open it, find your community on the map and look for the little tags that show what your community is twittering about. Find the tag with the name of your fire, click it and watch the inset screen to see a real time flow of tweets about you.*

Wordpress <http://wordpress.com>

*This is an alternate blogging tool. It’s a bit more intensive, versatile, and professional than Blogger, but possibly a bit harder to use for beginners.*

Brightkite <http://brightkite.com>

*This is a location based, social media tool. It will provide a Google map with a link to where a photo or article is posted. It also provides a Google Earth KML for tracking where articles or pictures are posted.*

Flickr <http://www.flickr.com>

*This is a photo hosting site that’s a bit more professional and intensive than Picasa. Offers free hosting to a point. A little harder to use for beginners.*

**Lessons Learned**

Because the use of Social Media on fires is relatively new, these “lessons” are not provided as hard and fast rules. These are best practices, suggested by those who have used the tools at incidents and discovered what works and what doesn’t. As experience is gained, by you and others, capture your own list of lessons learned and share it with other PIO’s.

Social Media should be built into your Communications Strategy and it should meet your overall objectives. Remember, there is a difference between intelligence and information. You don’t have to post everything you know. You don’t have to use every tool available. Be strategic and make sure it meets your objectives. The key is, don’t start if you can’t maintain it, so make sure you have the right people with the right skills in place.

***Setting up shop***

* A good rule of thumb when finding someone to “run” your Social Media operation, look for someone with “uncommon sense” rather than common sense. The person needs very good judgment about how to engage and when to engage and it’s a big responsibility. Reasonable fire experience is also necessary.
* If you build the machine you have to feed it. It’s great that we now have better, faster methods for giving people information, but traditionally, we don’t get much except at the planning meeting. It’s critical that you set up methods and expectations with Command and General Staff concerning what you need, when and how.
* Communications or an Operations radio is a good place to pick up information that can be vetted with Operations.
* Talk to Operations about putting an “ops savvy” PIO in Operations to listen for and vet information that can be sent out.
* Or, see if operations would be willing to stop in every 30 minutes to an hour to provide details. Remember, what THEY think is worth mentioning, might be different than what you are looking for. Be clear about the kind of information you want. The statement “crews were successful building line from the Hangdog River up to the top of the ridge east of the fire” may not be something Ops would even pay attention to, but it is definitely good news that you can tweet out.
* Talk to Operations about putting a PIO with Division Supervisor in a critical division specifically to feed information back that can be vetted and posted.
* Talk to Command and General staff about who would be willing to participate in short videos for posting about many subjects: strategic decisions, a giant smoke column, leader’s intent, supporting 1,000 firefighters in a cow pasture, an Australian fire crew, etc.
* Make sure to check with the local agency about social media they, or their stakeholders, are already using and build onto that, and ensure it’s incorporated in your Communication Strategy. Tapping into, feeding and directing people to local social media resources can help you get started faster with an established base, as well as allow you to develop an audience for the local agency that will benefit them long after you are gone. In addition, absorbing established audiences will make it easier to direct them back to the local social media sites when the incident is over.
* Determine a system for vetting information: who can post and who has to approve before it gets posted.
* Remember Social Media is different than a simple website in that it is interactive. It’s a conversation. Someone needs to be assigned to speak from your end. Respond to inquiries, answer questions, and speak like a real person.
* Don’t forget to spread the word about the social media efforts you are making. Put it in your press release and on your websites. Make sure all Command and General staff and PIO’s know all the URLs. Create business cards with websites and links on one side, and QR codes on the back. 8.5 x 11 posters printed with QR codes are great for for bulletin boards and can make web access simple for our very mobile populations. See APPENDIX B for instructions about using QR Codes and a link to a QR Code generator..
* Don’t remove or stop negative comments. As long as it’s not abusive or otherwise objectionable, let it stay. We’re not here to censor but allow free discussion into which we interject accurate, timely, truthful information. Research shows that Social Media communities tend to be self correcting, and people will correct erroneous or inflammatory posts. As discussed earlier, there are ways to move argumentative discussion offline.
* Every attempt should be made to be 508 compliant (see details at <http://www.section508.gov/>). Some general rules of thumb: videos, pictures, podcasts, etc only need to be captioned if they convey critical information that’s not available elsewhere. For instance, if your podcast is merely Operations or the IC stating what is already in the press release or other printed document, it does not have to be captioned. However, it’s a good idea to do the “right” thing and try to caption everything that has a spoken word.

***Aggregator***

* An aggregator is simply a way to pull many things into one place. For instance, the aggregator suggested here simply pulls RSS feeds or URLs from a number of search engines, back to one spot. After you do this once, you never have to go back to look at all your search engines; you simply look at the aggregator which pulls in the information you want, automatically.
* Google Reader is a good aggregator. Pull all RSS feeds or search URLs into this aggregator.
* Google Reader will pull most blog, website, discussion group and other mentions of your Incident into one location. It makes documentation of coverage much easier and ensures you’ve captured most of what’s being said. For example: go to any search engine, search for your fire, when the search results appear either copy the URL at the top of the page or the RSS feed if there is one, open Google Reader, and paste the URL into the “subscriptions” box. It’s that simple. Paste as many searches as you like into it and you only have to look at Google Reader to monitor your incident.

***Microblogs like Twitter***

* A suggested standard for naming fire twitter accounts would be the full name of your fire. Robert Hills Fire, or Honey Prairie Fire, or Copper Mountain Fire. Do not use “wildfire.” If the name is exceptionally long, try to only use two words before “Fire.” The idea, the public they can search for the fire by the name the media uses, but by establishing a shorter hashtag, they can also search more quickly and specifically.
* Use hashtags (#) to help people get just the information they want. Create a short hashtag. As a suggested standard for hashtags, use the first name of your fire, followed by the word “Fire” (no spaces). I.E.. for the Robert Hills Fire, use #RobertFire, and ensure it accompanies every tweet. That way, when people want just YOUR fire, (#RobertFire) they only get what they want. A search for Robert Fire (w/o the #) will get every tweet with the word Robert and the word Fire. The hashtag makes it yours.
* Put links at the beginning of your Tweet. That way, if the end gets chopped off as people retweet, the important link remains intact.
* **Restrict tweets to 120 characters** instead of 140 to make it easy for people to retweet. That way we edit the message instead of someone else. Retweeting is how things go viral.
* Eliminate as many abbreviations as possible both fire and text abbreviations. Many people are exposed to Twitter for the first time on a fire and don’t know a lot of the “lingo.”
* Post instructions on how to get twitter on your cell phone on websites and your bulletin boards, make sure all Command and General staff and PIO staffers know how.
* Use twitter to drive people to bulletin boards and websites. You can only convey so much in 120 characters and twitter should not replace our proven methods of passing information.
* Make your tweets count. If you tweet meaningless or useless information people won’t listen and won’t retweet. Make every tweet count but don’t forget that even small statements make people feel like they are being communicated with.
* Back up your tweets on other sites like InciWeb or Facebook, your blog, etc.
* Monitor your followers. It’s awkward for a retweet to appear to be coming from an inappropriate source such as someone using the name HOT4YOU. You can delete followers if it appears they are inappropriate but be cautious.
* Think about setting up a PIO only, or Command and General staff only, Twitter account. It is possible to set up private twitter accounts, to which you control access. These communications are not visible to anyone except those you allow in the group. This can be used by field PIO’s to feed information back to the ICP. If all PIO’s are on it, internal people can stay informed and can use the information when out in the field, to keep the public and stakeholders up-to-date.
* Assume everything is FOIAble. Say only what you’re willing to defend in court.
* Be cautious about retweeting other people. YOU need to be the source. You don’t want to drive people elsewhere to get information.
* Be cautious about tweeting links. Ensure that they are official, credible links specific to your incident. I.E. a link to the Red Cross information about your incident or a link to the FEMA page with information for your citizens.
* Links to sources like newspapers is dangerous for a few reasons: 1) It gives them credibility as a source because YOU said they were; 2) Today’s story may be good – tomorrow’s may not be; 3) A fire IS a government event and sometimes there are articles or ads on media websites that are anti government or simply inappropriate.
* Correct significant inaccuracies right away – yours or someone else’s.
* Avoid getting into a public twitter battle with detractors. Tweet out the correct information on all your sites.
* Incident personnel will be using Social Media. Let them know you know, ask them to be appropriate, ask them to be safe and only do so on breaks and make sure they know it’s all FOIAble. A reminder at morning briefing, something like “Make sure that anything you post is something you want to defend in court because if it’s done while you are on this fire, it will be admissible.” Is usually sufficient to make them cautious.
* You can use incident personnel as sources. Follow them, vet their information with Operations and tweet it out as your own.
* Don’t forget to call a “Tweet-up” to get people to your public meeting. A Tweet up is a call to all your Twitter followers to come together and it’s an effective way to encourage attendance at a public meeting. A special get-together just for twitter followers should be encouraged for after the main meeting. This is a community of people who can help you.

***Social Networking Sites like Facebook***

* Suggested standard for naming: use the whole name of your fire: Robert Hills Fire, Honey Prairie Fire, etc. Start a “Fan Page” instead of a regular page because fan pages allow non-Facebook users to read your page; they cannot post any comments but they can see it. A regular Facebook page is not visible except to those with Facebook pages themselves. FYI: you must have a personal Facebook page to be able to start a fan page.
* People love maps. Sometimes InciWeb won’t let you link to Google Earth maps but you can link to them on Facebook. Facebook also allows for larger, higher definition topographical maps that your GIS unit can provide.
* You can link a Facebook page to a picture management site like Flickr. This allows for far more pictures than you can get on InciWeb and at higher resolution.
* Link your InciWeb page and Twitter account to Facebook. That way everything you put on InciWeb and Twitter, is automatically posted to Facebook.
* One of the benefits of Facebook is that it allows for feedback. Make sure you have set the privacy settings to allow people to post to your page and then, make sure someone is responding to posts from people. Yes, people will say negative things. No, you should not argue with them on Facebook. You will find that most times you can simply post the correct information or allow the community to police and correct itself.

***Video Hosting Sites like YouTube***

* YouTube videos should be captioned. You can caption video on YouTube using its software.
* You can also use CaptionTube or other software to caption video. <http://captiontube.appspot.com/>
* If your video doesn’t have someone speaking, it does not need a caption.
* If your video is simply offering the same information that is available in your press release, it does not have to be captioned, although it’s a good idea to do it anyway.
* YouTube is an excellent forum for education. Instead of a simple flyover video of the fire, take every opportunity to provide accompanying commentary explaining the fire mosaic, success and need for burnout, etc.
* There are many video hosting sites: Vimeo, Flickr, Myfirevideos at the Lessons Learned Center, etc.

***Blogging***

* Blogs give you a place to post non-fire status information, more feature article sorts of things.
* Blogs are great for longer posts and educational pieces with pictures about: camp life, burnouts, a Google Earth tutorial, a crew from New Zealand, etc.
* Short paragraphs on feature like subjects can stimulate the media to do their own feature articles.
* A blog needs a writer. Assign someone with writing skills to create content. Don’t forget to tweet out or push elsewhere every time you put something new on your blog

***Analytics***

* Social Media gives us new methods of reaching people, but one of its greatest assets is allowing us to hear back from people and adjust what we deliver mid-stream. It’s important that the Social Media person fulfill a responsibility to watch for trends, subjects, rumors etc., and feed those back to the PIOs.
* It’s a good idea to have a daily report, no more than 1 page, provided to the PIO staff (perhaps including the IC) at the evening meeting. They should report on trends, persistent rumors, and needs expressed on the Social media sites. This report should be used to create the next day’s talking points and press release and become part of the final narrative and fire package.
* These reports will allow all PIO’s to be responsive and adapt messages to expressed needs of the public and stakeholders.
* Analytic tools should be used to track the effectiveness of Social Media on the incident, and determine best practices. This is critical to help other PIO’s as they begin to engage, focus on what works, and validate the use of Social Media as an effective communication tool. A final report should be prepared for the incident “documentation package” outlining the buildup of audiences for each tool from beginning to end, examples of issues that were handled with the help of Social Media, best practices and tips, and how Social Media was incorporated into the overall Communications Strategy.

***VOS Group*** (Virtual Operations Support Group. See [www.vosg.us](http://www.vosg.us) for more information on Virtual Operations Support or read the paper “Trial by Fire: The Deployment of Trusted Digital Volunteers in the 2011 Shadow Lake Fire” at <http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/social_media.html>).

In light of many agencies reluctance to enter into the Social Media arena, the limited number of PIOs with social media skills, and the lack of adequate numbers of PIOs on incidents to fully use and monitor social media, other options have been considered, tested and analyzed. One such idea which has proven effective at least twice is something called a VOST (Virtual Operations Support Team). It is a group of virtual volunteers, organized to assist a team, an event, or anyone else, create, harness and push information and messages via social media. The value of a VOST is proven – members need not be subject matter experts (SMEs), simply trusted social media practitioners, so there are plenty; they are volunteers so there is no cost; it takes advantage of the *worldwide* nature of the web; and it is not located *at the scene* of the disaster, but rather remains geographically removed and therefore not affected by unfolding events that can affect the ability to use social media, like power, phones, and internet connections. The basics are as follows

1. Get involved in Social Media to some extent. You do have to know the basics and establish a connection with some people. While it’s not important to know everything about social media and all the tools, you do need to know what’s out there, and basically how they work, to be able to instruct your VOST or PIO’s about what you want and provide clear leader’s intent.
2. Either send out a message via your social media network or contact someone who knows a lot about it, and ask for people who might like to get involved in such a group. Again, they don’t have to be SME’s, just “trusted agents.” This means you have watched them on social media and know what they talk about and how responsible they are, you know them personally, or they are referred by someone who you know and trust who is very practiced at social media. Get as many people as you can because like all volunteer groups, they will not all be available when you need them. 6 or 8 working is usually sufficient at a minimum, so you need two or three times that amount on your roster. More doesn’t hurt.
3. Choose one person you know personally or by reputation and ask them to lead the group. Allow that person to organize the group, check on abilities and determine which people would be best at building a presence on what application. It’s important that there be one conference call with most of the group to establish what you’re trying to do and providing clear leader’s intent about what you want during an incident. This should be in writing. (see Appendix A for an example) After that, allow your primary contact to use their expertise to divvy up jobs.
4. Tools used in the past were: Skype (for ongoing streaming instant messaging type conversation), Google docs (used to keep a virtual 214 where everyone logs what they are doing and keeps all other documents related to the group like contact info, objectives, passwords, etc), Box or Dropbox (for simple download of photos, videos, etc. and larger items for posting), Keepstream or Storify (to serve as virtual documentation. All monitoring results are pushed here for the record); Gmail (a group account used to pass along press releases, pictures, maps etc. for posting); Flickr or Picasa (for storing large amounts of high res photos that can be linked back to Inciweb or Facebook); and YouTube, Vimeo or MyFireVideo (used to store and link to video).
5. Your primary contact and the group will know many tools besides these, likely even better ones that could be used to accomplish your mission. Remember, everyone has to be able to get to these tools including you which may have some restrictions if you will be using a work computer hooked to an agency network. At the least, you need to be part of the streaming conversation and Skype may not be possible. The group needs to find something that works.
6. Remember, the VOST doesn’t *GENERATE* anything as far as information. You are still in control of and responsible for the information that is pushed out. The VOST will merely push that information farther, an information force multiplier.
7. The VOST also plays a critical role in monitoring. Your leader’s intent should also include direction to monitor all social media sites that are created, and use a variety of monitoring tools to scan the web, social media, discussion groups, blogs, etc, and provide feedback about what is being said about your incident. This information is important to provide better intelligence and situational awareness, allowing you to guide your PIO’s in crafting talking points and messages to handle immediate and long-term public perceptions.
8. You SHOULD use the name of your fire on your Social Media sites. (see specific site information above for suggested standard naming protocols). Use either the logo of the agency with jurisdiction over the incident (if the agency permits the use of social media) or the “Official Fire Information” logo we have provided here and on the PIO Bulletin Board at NIFC. It will help build recognition of your sites as “official” even if they do not have an agency logo.
9. Do have your Web 2.0 person, (or whomever you have designated as in charge of InciWeb, local agency websites, and social media), remain in constant contact with the VOSG. Having Skype or your instant messaging program and Google Docs up and running at all times, will ensure they if they need you or you need them, someone is always available.
10. Much of the work organizing this effort can and should be done pre-season. The group (whatever you decide to call it) can create an email account, a Google docs account, an instant message group or skype group, a drop box account, and clear leader’s intent and objectives at least. These are internal working accounts for the group. The members who will be creating and maintaining actual social media sites like Flickr, or YouTube or Facebook, or Wordpress or Twitter can be identified. The sites themselves will have to wait till an incident occurs.
11. It’s not important that the VOST members be involved in anything related to fire or disasters or emergencies. They do not have to live anywhere near you or even in the United States. In fact, having a group scattered across the world and various time zones is valuable as it ensures that you will have someone available at all times. What’s important is that they be technically skilled, active in social media and willing. The leader of the group should be willing to do the initial organization if you can’t and try to ensure that members are people that can be trusted to follow the guidelines the group establishes. But ultimately, if they make a mistake, your agency is not attached to your social media outreach, so there is a bit of distance.
12. There is value in recruiting local contributors to your VOST. Local social media activists, or even evacuees who have been displaced, can provide valuable help, information and perspectives, especially regarding local issues, terminology, and locations. However, as is common with local volunteers, it’s important that they be in a special category. For instance, regular VOST members should merely be posting the messages you provide and monitoring for feedback and concerns. Local people affected by the incident, may have very personal reactions to the information, so they should not be relied upon to manage or run individual tools. They are valuable force multipliers, however, and can really help get your message to very specific groups of people in the incident area.

***Official Fire Information***

Those of us in the information business realize there is value to being an “official” source. Toward that end, we have attempted to create a way to “brand” official information sites in a non-agency logo, interagency way. In APPENDIX C, you will see a new logo. We encourage you to use this logo as the avatar on your social media sites, on business cards you hand out, on your bulletin boards as a poster and even on your letterhead for your press releases, instead of your team or the agency letterhead. The public will quickly learn that, where the “official” logo is, is an official site for information.

The idea is that if we work together, on incidents across the country, we can educate communities about how to know when information is “official.” If we all use the logo (the actual name on the account will be specific to each incident so there will be no confusion when there are multiple incidents), we can achieve something like InciWeb has: an interagency, available to all, crossing all agency boundaries, point of “official” information.

***NIXLE***

Nixle is a free program that offers a lot of operability for PIO’s. It’s used primarily by law enforcement and EOCs as it offers secure communication channels and reverse 911 options at a cost. This is why the part of the program PIO’s would use, is free. (Nixle cannot currently be used by the U.S. Forest Service). The problem it solves is the limitations of Gmail when you have large email lists. Gmail maxes out at a certain number of emails and if you are facing a large incident, you will hit that maximum, likely right when you need it most.

Nixle offers more than just unlimited emails but let’s get some basics out of the way. It is NOT a replacement for a Gmail or other email account. Nixle is a PUSH only, meaning it sends things out but is not built to allow people to respond. So you still need an email account for the daily back and forth emails, and for people to contact you. You would use it to push out the daily press release, for instance, but there would be a note on your email that told people not to REPLY to the email and provide the actual email address. At this time, although they are working on it, Nixle also does not allow you to attach a document or PDF. Your press release, much like on Inciweb, must be pasted into the body of your email. There is a size limit, but a quick examination puts the allowable space at something like 6 or 7 pages of text which should be sufficient for press releases

There are additional things Nixle offers. You can build an unlimited number of email groups and sub groups and send information to any or all of them. When you send out an email, you also have the option of an accompanying text message, or you can just send a text message without an email. This means you can build a list of, perhaps, just your PIO’s so you can text them short information updates while they are out in the field (i.e. “The column showing to the west is just the burnout in Div W and its going well”). Or you could make a list of just your team members to keep them updated on something (i.e. “The public meeting has moved from the visitor’s center to the sports arena. Still 8 pm.”) Additionally, if you have set up Facebook or Twitter accounts, you can select those buttons before sending, and your email/text will be posted on both those sites as well, automatically.

Nixle is not hard to use. There is a person who will help you (you have to be approved) get set up and even run you through a quick lesson. Try getting set up on your own, but if you have trouble, call Travis Scott at 1-877-649-5373 or email him at [travis.scott@nixle.com](mailto:travis.scott@nixle.com).

The nice thing about this system is, if Gmail has been working fine for you, keep using it. If you would like the additional functions of Nixle, or find your incident has grown past Gmail’s functionality, it’s fairly simple to get it up and running especially if you have signed up for an account already. If you plan to use it for a team, I would sign up as the team because emails will be “from” the account owner. You can talk to Travis more about the specifics.

APPENDIX A

Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST) for Shadow Lake #ORFire

**Objectives/Tasks/Assignments**

1. Monitoring:
   1. Follow trends and let PIO know what we’re seeing (before daily evening meeting)
   2. Let PIO know issues and concerns that are popping up such as misinformation or angry postings we need to correct or deal with.
2. Messaging:
   1. Provide the supportive voice for the team and its efforts.
   2. Push out key messages. We should have some every day.
   3. Use key messages and releases as you wish to post on pages.
3. Documentation/Archiving
   1. Compile media coverage links by date (traditional and non) for documentation file
   2. Figure out how to document social media chatter (most interested if something happens: big run on the fire, evacuations, big political stink over smoke or something like that)
   3. Document this experiment from your perspective for our AAR. We’ll document as well and we’ll work together to document the experiment
4. Use and Learn New Tools
   1. Help PIO learn how to use other tools (such as UStream)
   2. Use any tools you know about, try new things, and communicate what you’re doing. Try whatever you like – you are acting as private citizens after all. Just let us know what you’re doing so we can watch and learn.

Special Instructions:

* Ask if you’re not sure about the wording of something
* Provide us feedback from a citizen perspective. If it rubs you wrong, it will rub someone else wrong too.

APPENDIX B

QR Codes

Pretend this is your press release with this QR code at the bottom of the release. Use your smart phone and scanner program (download cam scan or bar code scanner for free if you don’t have one) and scan this and see where it takes you! They can be created for Inciweb, for your Facebook page, for the forest web page, for maybe an evacuation page or announcements on Inciweb, for a local webcam pointed at your fire…… use your imagination.



Go to the link below to create them. It takes maybe 10 seconds. TV stations can put them at the bottom of the screen. Newspapers can print them. If they are on a website, the link can be tweeted. Print them on sheets of paper to put on your bulletin boards and create business cards with phone, email and URLs on the front and QR codes on the back!!

<http://delivr.com/qr-code-generator>

APPENDIX C

Official Fire Information logo.

This logo is merely a suggestion. It was not created nor approved by a large group but by only a few PIO’s interested in finding a way to brand “official information” when agency logos cannot be used; and get something out in time for the 2012 fire season. Use it if you think it will help your communities understand WHICH information is from the official source. We suggest that using it on a letterhead, using it on 8.5x 11 sheets of paper on community bulletin boards or trapline stops, as well as as a social media avatar, will help brand “official” information in an interagency way.

