White Paper: Integrating Social Media into Drills and Exercises

The use of social media is an essential element of a comprehensive emergency management program. As such, it is critical that social media plans and procedures be regularly tested in a challenging and realistic exercise environment.

1. Executive Summary:

In recent years social media has become an increasingly important and effective tool for agencies to use in communicating with the public, particularly during an emergency response. The challenge, however, has been in designing a way to safely and realistically test social media plans and procedures in preparedness drills and exercises. Using active agency accounts that are viewable by the general public is problematic, because scenario details would likely alarm or confuse followers. On the other hand, using proprietary software programs that simulate social media are costly and don't offer the realism necessary for a robust test of capabilities.[1]

There is a third option pioneered by Argonne National Laboratory's Public Affairs Science and Technology (PAST) Fusion Cell – using actual live social media platforms in a closed and protected environment, so that all the information stays in the exercise realm and is only visible to approved participants. The benefits of this approach include unparalleled realism, universal accessibility, no-cost, and gaining valuable hands-on experience with real-world social media tools. This approach does require a strong commitment to coordination during the exercise planning phase, and a close working relationship between the exercise management team and public affairs partners on- and off-site.

2. Background:

The communication of timely and accurate information to people potentially at risk from a hazardous event is at the heart of an effective emergency response. Whether the information is focused on saving lives, protecting property or calming fears, messages that are clear, concise and instructive will increase public understanding and allow people to take practical steps to protect themselves before, during and after a crisis. Conversely, the failure to provide such information often results in misinformation and speculation that may unnecessarily alarm people or cause them to act in ways that actually *increase* their potential for harm. As was noted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, people suffer when information is neither timely nor accurate, yet "achieving both timeliness and accuracy in an environment of 24/7 news and information and ever expanding media is difficult in the best of times; in the midst of chaos and uncertainty, it can be an immense challenge."[2]

In recent years, social media and digital communication technologies have rapidly and undeniably changed the way information is collected and shared, resulting in a dramatic increase

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[1] *Incorporating Social Media Into Your Exercises #SMEM,* by Kim Stephens, idisaster 2.0 blog post, June 4, 2015, https://idisaster.wordpress.com/.
[2] *First Informers in the Disaster Zone: The Lessons of Katrina,* Communications and Society Program, p. viii, by Albert L. May, The Aspen Institute, Washington, DC, 2006.

in the number of channels – each with advantages and disadvantages – that are available to communicate emergency messages. It is clear that the emergence of social media and digital communication are redefining the roles of government and media. The Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 dramatically highlighted the importance of social media "as a key communications tool to keep the media and frightened citizens accurately informed about what was going on."[3] Yet the underlying goal (and challenge) of effective crisis communication remains essentially the same: getting the right information to the right people at the right time so they can make the right decisions.

Social media is the channel through which users collaborate, share and discuss in real-time. Social media is distinct from traditional media in that it provides the ability for real-time collaboration, sharing and discussion by anyone with internet access. Social media continues to have a major impact on the emergency management community. It shapes how crises are communicated and how response is coordinated. It provides new and accessible communication platforms that offer the opportunity to reach more people than ever before. Additionally, social media technology provides a mechanism for agencies to quickly relay critical information in a time of crisis to the public, the media and each other. It is a proven and invaluable resource for emergency management across the world.

Social media technologies are the standard for rapid information dissemination and can enhance an agency's information network efforts to reduce the impact of emergencies and disasters on life and personal property. Social networks can be used as notification systems, in recovery efforts, as emergency information gathering, and as information repositories. As the way people gather, create and share information evolves, emergency managers must continuously examine the way in which they engage stakeholders, and disseminate and monitor information. New technologies are constantly in flux, creating challenges for how emergency professionals do their jobs. Ensuring that emergency public information teams are trained to effectively and efficiently manage online information and social media is imperative when completing their most important mission – saving lives.

3. Issue:

As outlined in the Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP) guidance: "Exercises play a vital role in national preparedness by enabling whole community stakeholders to test and validate plans and capabilities, and identify both capability gaps and areas for improvement. A well-designed exercise provides a low-risk environment to test capabilities, familiarize personnel with roles and responsibilities, and foster meaningful interaction and communication across organizations."[4] With the advent and continuing growing importance of social media as an emergency preparedness and response tool, social media plans and procedures must be tested in a robust exercise environment using real-world platforms, but without causing public alarm or confusion.

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[3] *Social Media: Big Lessons from the Boston Marathon Bombing*, Government Technology Magazine, by Tod Newcombe, September 24, 2014, http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Social-Media-Big-Lessons-from-the-Boston-Marathon-Bombing.html.
[4] *Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program (HSEEP)*, Department of Homeland Security, April 2013, p. Intro-1.

4. Solution:

As with all elements of an exercise, the use of social media must occur in a safe, controlled environment. In conducting an exercise, reasonable precautions should always be taken to ensure that exercise play is not mistaken for a real-world situation – for example, by saying "exercise message" before and after phone calls, marking "EXERCISE" on written products such as news releases, and using different siren sounds to indicate a drill or exercise. The solution pioneered by the PAST Fusion Cell involves employing real-world, native social media platforms that are set up in such a way that all the information stays in the exercise realm and is only visible to approved participants.

Once these exercise-specific accounts are established, they can serve as stand-ins for the social media sites that agencies operate in the real-world, and players can use them for training and exercises in the same way they would in an actual event—to share information, gather intelligence, engage with the public, etc. This approach has been successfully and repeatedly tested in a range of exercise environments, from small stand-alone drills and functional exercises that focus only on emergency public information, to large full-scale exercises with multiple players participating from across agencies and jurisdictions.

Setting Up Social Media Exercise Accounts

The world of social media can change dramatically in a relatively short period of time. The most popular sites today may be replaced by new and different sites tomorrow. To date, social media platforms used in exercises have focused on the two social media sites that currently are most frequently used as part of an emergency public information program – Twitter and Facebook. As other platforms, such as Instagram, gain relevance within emergency management, they can also be exercised following this same process. Additionally, users can practice and gain experience with these sites alongside applicable third-party tools, like Hootsuite for example.
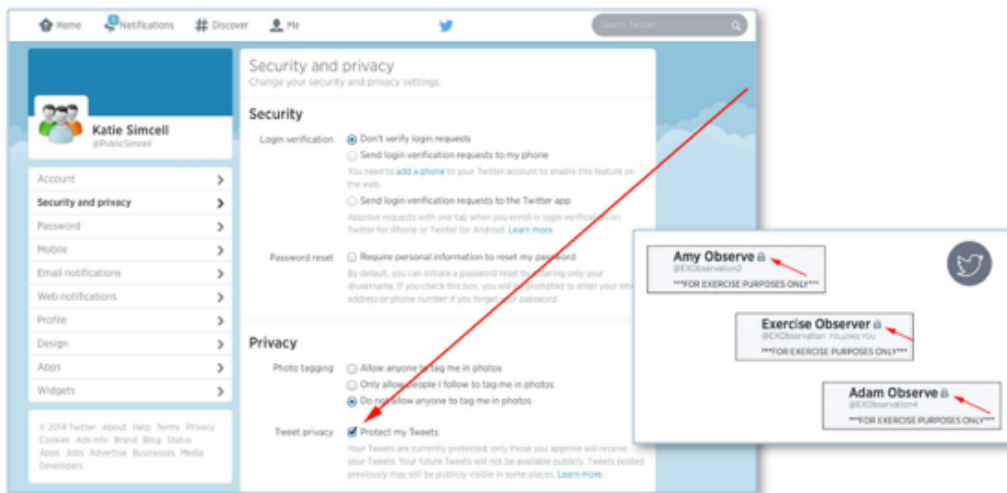
In establishing exercise accounts, each agency should set up its own individual exercise accounts, which can then be linked with other participating exercise accounts to form a "closed loop" network. In addition to participating agencies, exercise play may be expanded and made more robust by creating social media sites that serve as stand-ins for the public and the news media or by working with a Simulation Cell (Simcell) that provides these inputs. In many PAST Fusion Cell supported exercises, there are social media accounts operated by the mock media team that represent the news media (under the Exercise Training Network) and the broad-range of public interests. Special "observer" accounts may also be created to provide access for controllers and evaluators.

This process only needs to be performed once, and then the accounts will remain active and available for all future exercise play. Two additional general control measures are strongly recommended:

1. Do not link exercise accounts with personal accounts; this is the best way to ensure that exercise play stays, as intended, within the exercise realm.

2. Designate a single team member to create and manage the agency accounts; this person will be responsible for authorizing use of the accounts for training and exercises, and for providing overall oversight.

There are other specific protective steps that will be necessary when setting up exercise accounts on each social media platform. These steps will differ depending on the unique privacy measures built into the site. For example, in Twitter there are multiple "Settings" options, the most important of which is to "Protect my Tweets" so that only those who have been personally approved can see them. As users look to follow other exercise accounts, a "lock" icon should always be visible next to the account name. This indicates the tweets are protected. If an icon isn't visible, the account should not be followed, nor should it be approved as a follower.

Screenshots from Twitter showing how to "Protect my Tweets."

Likewise for Facebook, there are multiple options to review and select under "Settings," the most important of which is to set the status so that only approved "Friends" can see the posts. Under "Privacy" users will be asked, "Who can see my stuff?" Select "Friends," and then send "Friend" requests only to other protected Facebook *exercise* accounts.
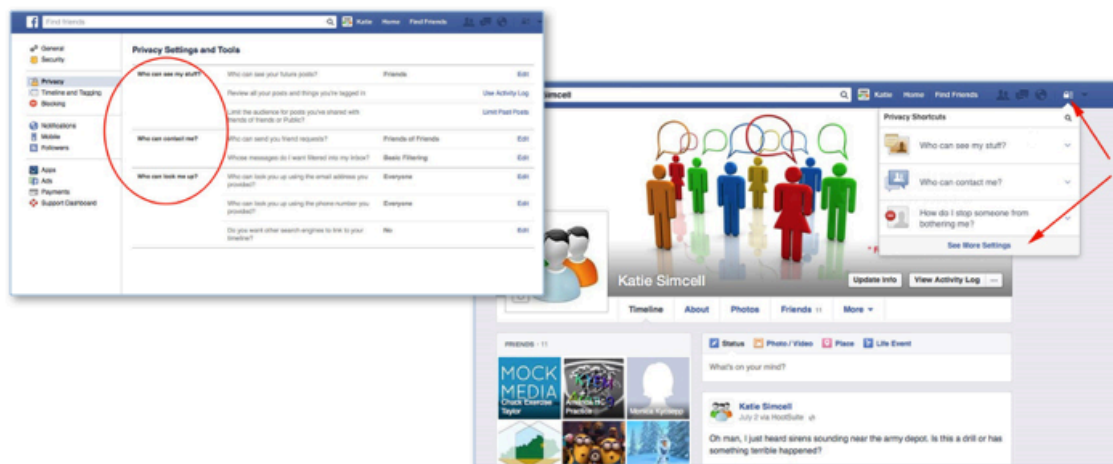
When the initial set-up is complete, the pages can be customized further. A photo representing the agency should be included in the profile, and for another level of protection the following disclaimer (or some variation) should be included somewhere on the page:

—EXERCISE—EXERCISE—EXERCISE—
This site is for exercise and training purposes only. All events are simulated. Do not publish or broadcast as a real event.

Once the social media exercise accounts are established they are ready to be deployed. Users should ensure that all identified participant accounts are linked together. For Twitter, this means the main exercise Twitter account and the other participant accounts are both "Following" and "Follower." For Facebook, this means the main exercise Facebook page and the other participant pages are all "Friends." When using the accounts, users should also consider including the phrase "This is an Exercise" at the beginning of each message to provide an additional layer of security.

Screenshots from social media accounts showing "exercise and training" disclaimers and protections.

Social Media Exercise Play

It is highly recommended that prior to using these accounts in a formal drill or exercise, a dry-run be scheduled in advance, with all participants logging into their accounts and joining on a conference line (or webinar, if available) to discuss what they're seeing on the screen. This is an opportunity to make a few test Facebook posts and tweets on Twitter to determine if any final adjustments are needed, prior to commencing actual exercise play.

For the exercise itself, it will be most beneficial to work with a Simcell that can simulate social media inputs from the public and the news media to create a more dynamic and realistic exercise environment. This can include pre-scripted injects based on the scenario, as well as real-time interactions based on player actions.

Screenshots from social media accounts showing exercise posts and interactions among players.

5. Potential Application:

The HSEEP Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs) are designed to help organizations map exercise results to exercise objectives, core capabilities, capability targets and critical tasks for further analysis and assessment. The EEG template for Public Information and Warning identifies the core capability as: "Deliver coordinated, prompt, reliable, and actionable information to the whole community through the use of clear, consistent, accessible, and culturally and linguistically appropriate methods to effectively relay information regarding any threat or hazard and, as appropriate, the actions being taken and the assistance being made available."[5] The effective use of social media in prevention, protection, mitigation, response and recovery activities is central to meeting the Public Information and Warning core capability, and thus a necessary component in all different types of exercises.

The established technique for virtual social media exercising can be applied in any exercise environment, from small stand-alone drills and functional exercises that focus only on emergency public information to large full-scale exercises with multiple players participating

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[5] HSEEP Exercise Evaluation Guides (EEGs), September 2015, https://www.preptoolkit.org/web/hseep-resources/eegs.

from across agencies and jurisdictions. The technique is equally adaptable to tabletops and virtual distance exercises, where players may be participating from various remote locations. Observations and data collection derived by evaluators from monitoring social media activity can be seamlessly included in the exercise evaluation process.

The PAST Fusion Cell successfully employs virtual social media exercising for a number of Federal, state, and local agencies. For example, the Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration employs virtual social media exercising as part of its exercise program at facilities around the country, most recently at the Nevada National Security Site, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant and Idaho National Laboratory.

6. References:

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Social Media Annex, from Pueblo and Blue Grass CSEPP Exercises.