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7-11-2012

## The Social Media Spectrum

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### CU Commons Citation

Van Leuven, Laurie J., "The Social Media Spectrum" (2012). *Homeland Security & Emergency Management Faculty Research*. 9.

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The Social Media Spectrum  
by Laurie J. Van Leuven (Holien)

When it comes to social media practices within the realm of homeland security and emergency management, one thing is clear: There is no “one size fits all.” Every organization could be charted to fall on a different point along a diverse spectrum of possible goals, strategies, and tactics. But it may likely be an organization’s attitude, culture, and structure (not the complexity of their approach) that best determines the success rate of their efforts.

The Homeland Security Enterprise (HSE), which by most accounts includes a wide array of public safety, infrastructure and military disciplines from local, state, tribal, Federal, nonprofit, private sector and volunteer organizations, has thrust an increasing level of interest and attention towards social media within the last few years. What began as the newest fad to infatuate the tech-savvy public for the purpose of entertainment has settled into a distinct shift in how a significant portion of society accesses and shares information on all topics and fronts. What’s even more alarming for the HSE is the public’s rising expectations that government agencies will embrace social media and establish effective mechanisms to interactively engage the Whole Community<sup>1</sup> during emergencies.

Acknowledging the changing role of the individual and espousing the importance of partnership and collaboration is one thing; modifying policies, practices, and organizational structure and systems to enable the use of citizen reports from unofficial sources during times of chaos is in an entirely different league. Quite frankly, adaptation to innovative technologies and practices has never been government’s *forte* and emergency management is inherently risk adverse when it comes to trying new tactics.

The long line of succession into the field of emergency management and homeland security largely stems from the law enforcement and fire safety professions, and rightly so. The academic field of homeland security is still in its infancy and public safety disciplines possess natural ties and skill sets that aid missions during emergency incidents. However, there can be a disconnect between the structured concepts of “command and control”—so vital for on-scene incident management professionals—versus the rapidly evolving and dynamic capabilities of “individuals as sensors and force multipliers in the field” who can capture, document, relay first-hand knowledge, and spread alerts within seconds via smartphones. We simply cannot command and control the public on social media channels.

Research conducted in 2009 (via a case study and interviews with emergency managers from around the country) reveals great potential for Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, blogs (and microblogs), mashups, and text messaging, but that there are perceived challenges by some emergency managers<sup>2</sup>. The four challenges mentioned most frequently were:

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<sup>1</sup> The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) subscribes to the Whole Community approach in which we need to engage with and empower all layers of society to understand and meet their needs.

<http://blog.fema.gov/2012/01/whole-community-approach-to-emergency.html>

<sup>2</sup> Van Leuven, Laurie; *Optimizing Citizen Engagement During Emergencies through Use of Web 2.0 Technologies*; Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, March 2009,

[http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2009/Mar/09Mar\\_Van\\_Leuven.pdf](http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2009/Mar/09Mar_Van_Leuven.pdf)

1. Lack of resources to track, verify, and manage information overload
2. Mistrust of the content or the web platform
3. Unfamiliar with the technology (“My kids use it, I don’t.”)
4. Lack of leadership or organizational support

These four challenges still surface today when the HSE debates the merits of social media tactics. However, challenge number four (Leadership stance and organizational culture) has emerged as being the main defining criteria that influences where an organization lands on the social media spectrum. Organizational leadership that is adverse to change, slow to implement new technology, and skeptical of positive interactions with the public will naturally resist implementing a social media strategy. At the same time, one or two internal champions within an organization can make progress implementing social media tactics to support an otherwise traditional information-sharing model, but the distance they can travel along the Social Media Spectrum without true leadership support is limited and could be threatened when and/or if one of the champions leaves the organization.

For example, there are some excellent practitioners at local government agencies who are extremely skilled at establishing policies and procedures, setting up a strong social media presence, populating accounts with relevant content, attracting followers, and engaging members of their community. Most often, these champions, or “true believers,” are the driving force responsible for breaking down walls and resistance within an organization to ultimately gain leadership support and be granted approval to proceed with certain tactics. But for each of these true believers that break through the barriers, there are numerous others who have tried and were not successful or have only made limited progress by simply setting up a few social media accounts and using them to push out news releases and officially sanctioned updates. Why is this? Why have some organizations succeeded with engagement efforts via social media where others could not? And how do we advance our stance along the Social Media Spectrum<sup>3</sup>?

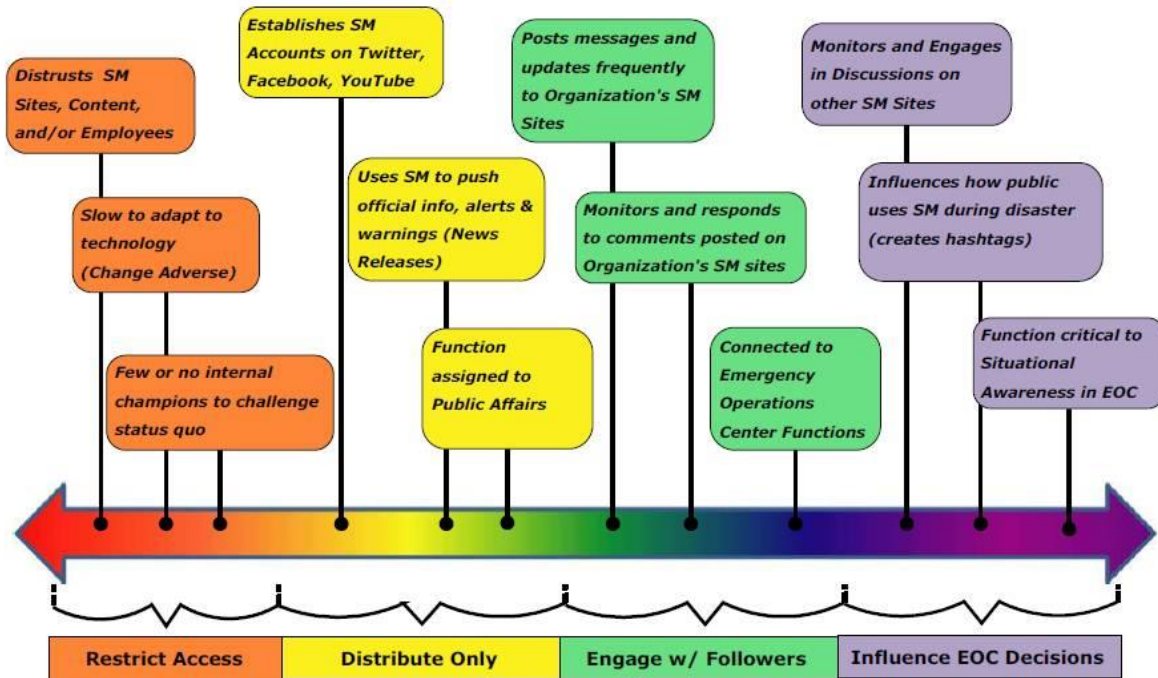
### **Organizational Culture Defines Goals, Objectives and Tactics**

Anyone who has ever gone through the arduous process of sitting in a room with a team working to define an organization’s mission statement or craft the goals, objectives, and strategies planned for the next five years can attest to the value of zeroing in on the tactics. It is the tactics that provide the real measure of whether or not the objectives are realistic and attainable. You can craft wonderfully insightful goals, but if there are no feasible tactics you can actually employ to reach them, the exercise will ultimately fail. Equally important is whether or not the organizational structure is conducive to carrying out the necessary tactics to reach the desired outcome. Based on these assertions, let’s examine the Social Media Spectrum according to common tactics used by organizations operating within the HSE.

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<sup>3</sup> Graphic developed by Laurie J. Van Leuven

# Social Media Spectrum



## Tactical Stances

The following categories provide some insight to different tactical stances taken by organizations related to where they might fall on the Social Media Spectrum.

1. **Restrict Access** – Some organizations are still in the starting blocks of the social media revolution. These organizations block social media sites and restrict employee access altogether, fearing risk to their internal IT systems or loss of productivity of employees who cannot be trusted to follow common workplace expectations. The organizational culture that considers social media to be a can of worms will not make progress along the Social Media Spectrum.
2. **Distribution Only** – Organizations that tolerate social media for the purpose of distributing content through social media are ahead of those that restrict access completely, but additional value is being lost. The organizational culture that adopts this stance is the most common within the HSE. This involves establishing accounts on popular social media sites and simultaneously sending official messages through multiple channels including traditional broadcast media, electronic media, and posting to an organization's own social media accounts. This tactic is usually carried out by an organization's Public Affairs or Communications staff. Leadership that accepts this tactic often does so because it can be delegated to existing staff and it provides the illusion that they can retain control of the message, releasing information only after it has been

well-vetted and approved. This approach does not hear or learn from the community and is limited in its ability to reach a significant portion of the community who do not follow official organizations or those who seek crisis information elsewhere (from unofficial sources).

3. **Engage With Followers** – The organizational leaders who seek citizen engagement and community collaboration often find this stance to be a favorable approach. Engaging in an interactive or a two-way exchange with those who opt in or choose to “Friend or Follow” an organization’s social media account provides a valuable feedback mechanism. There are a range of tactics that will help determine how successful this approach is, but, generally speaking, organizations that actively listen to their followers and engage regularly with the community through social networking venues are better positioned to address developing concerns and understand the hardships facing the impacted public.
  
4. **Influence Decision Making** – Leaders who recognize the capabilities of all members of society will seek ways to empower the whole community with opportunities to engage in omni-directional knowledge sharing<sup>4</sup>. This concept is implicit in the Homeland Security Presidential Policy Directive #8, which moves beyond government-centric strategies for preparedness and encourages community centric solutions to achieve disaster resiliency, while freeing up limited public safety resources to focus on the most vulnerable populations. This doesn’t imply shifting the responsibility away from official organizations, but rather recognizes the staffing and resource limitations during disasters and leverages those with smartphones to capture, report, and validate damage assessments instantly. Organizational leaders who seek out, listen, and make the public’s eye-witness reports visible to everyone may help the entire community make more timely and prudent response and recovery decisions. This tactical stance requires an organization structure implementing social media strategies that is married with operational decision making.

Not all information exchanges need to be two-way with official organizations. Community members can solve many problems on their own, and social media offers many powerful opportunities to create a common interface where they can come together and self organize during emergencies. Official organizations should be part of this wider community and should pay attention to their efforts, but do not necessarily need to be involved in every aspect or information exchange.

Government and volunteer-based organizations responsible for some element of crisis response and recovery will likely recognize where they land on the Social Media Spectrum. If there is a desire to move their organization further along the spectrum, the challenge is how to shift the organization’s philosophy and culture to value greater collaboration with the community and position the organization’s structure to take advantage of the attributes the public has to offer.

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<sup>4</sup> The term omni-directional knowledge sharing surfaced during FEMA’s Strategic Foresight Initiative in July 2011 and is referenced in Crisis Response and Disaster Resilience 2030  
<http://www.fema.gov/library/viewRecord.do?id=4995>

### *About the Author*

*Laurie Van Leuven has more than 12 years of operational experience in Emergency Management and Critical Infrastructure Security. She is a Homeland Security subject matter expert at Scientific Research Corporation often focusing on the use of social media tools during emergency operations. In 2010, Van Leuven was named a Naval Postgraduate School, Center for Homeland Defense and Security Alumni Fellow and in this capacity worked at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Headquarters in Washington D.C. . Prior to this, she worked for the City of Seattle as an Emergency Management and Security Strategic Advisor. Her master's thesis at the Naval Postgraduate School focused on increasing citizen engagement using social media and other web-based tools.*