

# Burning Issues: Social Media

Special Edition

December 2010

## Fire and Social Media: Managing for Multiple Objectives

by Don Smurthwaite

It wasn't long ago that I received an e-mail from a respected and knowledgeable leader in the fire and aviation community. His note boiled down to one question: "Why all the fuss about social media?" Try as he might, he just didn't see an "upside" to the fire community taking it on as a means of communication.

He went on to write that he didn't see where social media – Twitter, Facebook, blogging, YouTube, podcasting and other forms – fit in the fire world. He wrote that social media seemed to be driven by egos and took a pass when it came to verifying facts.

No argument about the egos and sloppy fact-checking. They are, unfortunately, part of the social media landscape. But my answer to him was something like this: Like it or not, social media is here to stay. It long ago passed the fad stage, and communicating through handheld devices was the future – and the future is now. In fire and aviation, our choices boiled down to this: Either get in the game or get left behind.

### It's Not Just for Dreamers and Nerds Anymore

Consider these facts and observations:

- In 2005, only five percent of the Fortune 100 companies had a social media presence. That figure is up to 79 percent today.
- For those under 30 years of age, more than 80 percent of the information they receive comes from non-traditional media. In other words, the younger generation doesn't watch TV, doesn't read newspapers and magazines, and doesn't listen to the radio. Even news media giants such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, and almost all the major TV networks are experiencing steep declines in readership and viewership.
- One study said that within ten years, most of the information we receive will be from devices that *haven't yet been invented*.
- Facebook is expected to have 700 million users sometime in 2011.
- On the outs: fax machines (really, when was the last time you received an important business fax?), e-mail, traditional media, and—take a big gulp here – personal computers and even websites.
- Coming in: Mobile devices, which will be better, faster and do everything just short of brewing your coffee – and the morning java part is probably only a matter of time. Like it or not, we're all going to be going mobile in the not-so-distant future. Believe it or not, they will be almost indispensable to navigating through daily life, on the job and off.



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### Where Does it Fit with Fire?

So how does all of this relate to NIFC and the fire and aviation community is general?

Good question. To use a fire term common to all of us, it can help us manage for multiple objectives.

First, it helps us get to an audience that we badly need to reach. Think of recruiting. If we're trying to get in touch with the twenty-something group, it's not going to come through traditional vacancy announcements, not even those that are posted on-line. As more people switch to handheld

devices, traditional media is not going to even reach the thirty-somethings and forty-somethings and fifty-somethings. In another sign of the times, OPM now has its own outreach Facebook site.

Next, social media is fast and speed is everything in today's society. If we wait to send out a news release or even post something on a website, we're already way behind. Think of a

fast-moving fire that is threatening a community.

The residents are much more likely to read and respond to a tweet than they are to watching TV or waiting to read about it in

the morning paper.

This one hurts a bit, but social media sites generally have more local credibility than fire agencies. Social media represent friends and neighbors talking to, well, friends and neighbors. Who are you going to believe? The fellow across the street you've known for 20 years or the PIO flown in from two states over? Progressive PIOs and incident managers have made it a practice to quickly plug in to existing social networks when arriving on the scene and work *with* them to dispense information.

There are other reasons to engage in social media. It's a good way to find out what the public is thinking and saying. It demonstrates that fire agencies are technologically and socially up-to-date. It is a quick

way to counter erroneous information or spike rumors. And social media has unlimited potential in education, mitigation and prevention applications.

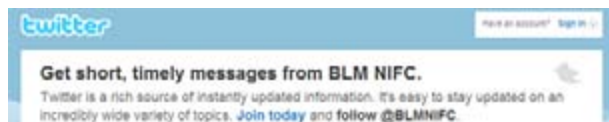
### Pushing Ahead Before Getting Pushed Out of the Way

So what are we doing about this at NIFC? We're pushing ahead with social media applications. We've already started podcasting, plus we have Twitter and Facebook accounts set up. In this edition of "Burning Issues," we'll provide a rundown on some of the social media applications NIFC agencies are using. And the cool part is we're just beginning. Expect that what we're doing today to be on its way out within two or three years — if that long — and we'll be starting in another direction with newer and even faster applications.

How about the veteran fire leader who had serious qualms about social media? I never heard back from him so I guess that means he's willing to at least consider that things are changing at warp speed and there might be practical uses for social media in fire and aviation.

At NIFC, we'll do our best to keep up, and occasionally drag you along with us, for what promises to be an interesting ride, complete with thrills, spills, chills, bumps and thumps, and the occasional blinding triumph, as we learn more about social media and put it to better use.

Expect a tweet from us in the near future!



## Interview with a Social Media “Master Performer”

by Ken Frederick

Eric Neitzel is, for lack of a better term, an incident management social media expert. He entered the wildland fire service as a volunteer at his local fire department when he was 16 years old and eventually parlayed that experience into a job with the Marinwood Fire Department in the Bay Area. Neitzel then transferred to an emergency services position with Marin County. In that job, he did public affairs and outreach work associated with training area high school students in fire and life safety. In 2001, Eric moved to Arizona and went to work for the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest, working in public affairs and website development. He quickly earned his NWCG public information officer quals, and soon after began specializing in internet and other web-based media applications on fires. Eric now works for the Show Low Fire Department, doing public information, social media and website development work. He also works as a communications consultant to companies and government agencies.



In 2003, Eric began creating and managing a web presence for one of the Southwest’s Type 1 incident management teams. He began working on ways to use the internet and email applications to send time-critical announcements and other forms of information. Since then, Eric has taken dozens of assignments with Type 1 and 2 teams, Area Command teams, and NIMO teams, fulfilling a fluid and slightly amorphous role of public information officer/website developer/social media specialist. He spoke with NIFC from his home in Show Low, Arizona.

BI: What is the first thing you do when you report to an incident as a social media technical specialist?

EN: I’m usually ordered as a PIO. When I check in, usually I start gathering intelligence related to which agencies and entities are involved in managing the incident. I also find out what the stakeholders’ policies are on using SM to reach out to publics impacted by the incident. I also find out what the IC’s and lead PIO’s plans are for using SM. After this situational assessment, I’ll sketch out a plan for which SM or combination of SM will best meet the incident’s needs. Then we roll up our sleeves and get to work.

BI: What has been the biggest change in social media in Fire and Aviation over the past three to five years?

EN: The biggest change is in agencies’ abilities to buy into the communication horsepower offered by SM. We’re seeing more and more buy-in. Teams are working to understand the moving parts of social media technologies and applications, and they’re also working to build policies around those understandings. These mediums of communication affect communities. IMTs and leaders in wildland fire are still figuring out how to grasp those effects, and how to move forward with what they have learned. They’re wrestling with questions like: what are these tools? Who should be wielding them? How do we use them to the best effect? What kinds of uses actually damage our communication, instead of benefit it?

BI: Which social media give PIOs, IMTs, and BAER teams the most bang for the buck?

EN: The biggest and best platform for instant communication is Twitter. It gives you the ability for near real-time information dissemination. Twitter isn’t built for disseminating huge blocks of information, but it is great for short messages and web links. Twitter’s natural strengths are boosted when you have other tools that mesh with it. For example, I use five core apps on my smartphone that interface with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.

BI: Is it a valid assumption that fire agencies have to talk to the public using social media? After all, how many people in Eastern Oregon or central Nevada are on Facebook?

EN: That’s a very valid assumption. As recently as two years ago, only a few rural residents were on Facebook and Twitter, but in the past year, the number of rural residents with these services has probably doubled. More and more wireless infrastructure is being built all the time. Here in Arizona, the wireless companies are really pushing to expand the wireless infrastructure on Native American reservations. SM is definitely part of our nation’s cultural and communication landscape.

BI: What is the biggest mistake social media users in Fire and Aviation make?

EN: The biggest mistake agencies make is failing to engage. SM is an extremely powerful tool to reach a very large number of people quickly. Or reach a specific group of the public quickly. For example, in northern Arizona, the Coconino National Forest tweets immediately whenever



smoke is in the air around Flagstaff. They tweet information even if the smoke is not from a Forest Service wildfire or prescribed burn. A lot of people in that community rely on the Coconino's Twitter feed to tell them what's going on. They couldn't care less that the tweets originate from the Forest Service. They simply want to know what's up with the smoke.

BI: What does it cost a Type 1 or Type 2 IMT to get engaged with social media on a large fire?

EN: Really, the only costs are paying the salaries of one to two positions assigned to the incident. My advice is for teams to get away from looking at SM in terms of the dollars it will cost to get on board with these services. It's really about the benefits of using SM. When a team starts using SM, the incident commander will see an immediate benefit. The team can rapidly update partners, stakeholders, the traditional news media, and the public.

There can be "costs," however, in using SM ineptly. I know of a government agency in the Southwest that exemplifies this. This agency recently went back and forth on Twitter with a member of the public for several hours, arguing over some issue. I watched what happened out of a morbid sense of curiosity. Over the next couple of days, their follower count plummeted. People were clearly turned off by the agency using the SM platform to have an argument. When you're using SM ineptly, it will bite you.

BI: What has been your biggest social media "ah ha!" moment in your career?

EN: I didn't have an "ah ha" moment; I had an "ah ha" fire. The Oakland Hills Fire of 1991 was the first campaign fire I was ever involved with fresh out of the fire academy. It was a case study in poor information. People were getting bad information through the news media. There was no clear voice on what was going on with that fire. People were dying because they were getting bad information on where to go, when to evacuate, etc. I remember thinking there just had to be a better way. All this was reinforced years later when we saw the Southern California firestorm of 2003. Social media are the "better way" to get quality information out rapidly.

BI: What do you hope to learn or what new skill do you plan to acquire related to social media in the next 12 months?

EN: I want to get to the point where I can absorb the new technologies and applications as they come out and implement those as quickly as I can, without that effort becoming a monster and eating all of my time. There's a relatively new platform called Tumblr that may overtake Twitter in the next few years. It does more than Twitter and Facebook while being as easy to use as Twitter for incident information. I've just started using it over the past month. It's pretty neat.

BI: Who is your social media hero?

EN: That's a slam-dunk. Brian Humphrey is the Los Angeles City Fire Department's social media PIO. He uses multiple platforms linked to one source, so he sends a single message from his desktop, his mobile phone, or his laptop, and that piece of information engages potentially millions of users. People see Brian's information on Twitter @LAFDTalk, YouTube, Facebook, and more. He also does a live webcast every week. People can ask any question to the LA City Fire Department using these technologies. He's now starting to use a social media platform for streaming video. Brian is doing what I've always wanted to do—but couldn't—on an incident.

## Uses Of Social Media Are Beginning To Pop Up Around NIFC...

*By Jenn Smith*

NWCG Training is exploring the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, RSS feeds with podcasting and use of mobile applications and devices to keep the field apprised of updates in training. Delivery platforms for content through these mediums are also being researched. Simulation immersion technology, like Second Life, is currently being experimented with and may be applied in the future for training as well.

The National Interagency Incident Communications Division (NIICD) uses Twitter for their infrared aircraft. NIICD uses Twitter to update aircraft locations and notify ordering units when their infrared imagery is ready for download. This media also helps communicate any problems associated with the imagery and to brief the Infrared Interpreter (IRIN) about observed fire behavior while in flight. A flight request was even once tweeted to the pilots during a mission.



## Indian Affairs Launches New Website and Explores Social Media Applications

by Robyn Broyles

Blackberries, iPhones, tethering, and Wi-Fi are all relatively new terms for the BIA Branch of Wildland Fire because until recently, this technology was off-limits to BIA employees. This year, however, a successful push to migrate the 63 BIA-NIFC employees onto the Indian Affairs server took place. For the first time, BIA NIFC employees have access to Inside Indian Affairs. This access has opened the door to exploring technologies and is helping managers stay connected while in remote field locations.

With the development of the BIA-NIFC website ([www.bia.gov/nifc/](http://www.bia.gov/nifc/)), the Branch is taking its first step towards re-establishing its Internet presence. The website is currently in the review stage and will be available publicly in January. As interest and use of the website grow and the needs of our audiences become voiced, the use of social media applications will be on the horizon.

In January of 2009, the BIA formed the Indian Affairs Web Council to provide leadership and direction to develop and manage a public-facing website, which Indian Affairs (IA) lacked for almost seven years due to a court order issued as part of the Cobell lawsuit. Today, the Web Council is growing stronger with more than 40 participants from different offices throughout the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Indian Education. The Council is working diligently to provide the policy, guidance and tools to build a strong and professional web presence. Indian Affairs will also be hiring a Social Media specialist who will help provide direction and support for guiding the direction of social media use within Indian Affairs.

“Social media efforts that start with a clear business purpose have the greatest opportunities for delivering value,” said Brian Hardy, Indian Affairs, Acting Deputy Chief Information Officer for Indian Affairs.

The IA Web Council is discussing potential uses for social media. The Branch is leading the Bureau by voicing an interest in using social media applications as a means to quickly and effectively share information. To be successful at this, the Branch’s first aim is to understand the business needs of the field and to provide easy-to-use applications that will foster collaboration and connectivity across the Branch.

## USDA Forest Service Use of Social Media in Fire Communications

by Jennifer Jones

The Forest Service has been wading into the use of social media in fire communications and is now about knee deep. Many Forest Service units, including Washington Office Fire and Aviation Management at NIFC, are eager to dive all the way in but must wait until the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) social media policy is finalized and more social media tools are approved for agency use to do so.

Meantime, the Forest Service is successfully using social media tools on a limited basis for fire communications. The most notable national example is the “Hot Links Wildfire Awareness Support” campaign that the Forest Service implemented last June in conjunction with the USDA/U.S. Department of the Interior news conference on the western wildfire season. The campaign used the USDA Facebook page, the USDA blog, and Twitter to disseminate daily messages for a period of approximately three weeks about prevention, risk reduction, response, rehabilitation, and other fire related topics. An average of about 13,000 people read the messages each day.

The Forest Service is also using social media tools to disseminate information about wildfires and prescribed fires. A number of social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, and Digg, are integrated into Inciweb ([www.inciweb.org](http://www.inciweb.org)), and many units that post incident information on the website use them. National Forests also use their own Twitter accounts to disseminate incident information.

For example, in the last three months, the Coconino National Forest in Arizona, which has more than 1,800 followers, has sent tweets about the status of the Schultz fire, rehabilitation of land burned in the Schultz Fire, fire restrictions, and smoke from prescribed fire.

The Forest Service has recently launched its own YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/usdaforestservice](http://www.youtube.com/usdaforestservice)). Expect to see the Forest Service posting videos about fire and aviation on that channel in the future and expanding its use of social media in fire communications as more tools become approved for agency use.



## How NASF, Smokey Bear and Disney are Sharing Space

by Robyn Broyles

Social media sites are giving Smokey Bear a new way to connect with people of all ages and spread his fire prevention message. Through the Cooperative Forest Fire Prevention (CFFP) Committee, the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), the USDA Forest Service and the Ad Council are working together to prevent human-caused wildfires using leading social media sites. It's all part of the National Wildfire Prevention Campaign.

NASF Communications Director Sarah McCreary says using social media tools invites people to be active, not passive participants. "Getting people to engage is really important because it provides an avenue for us to see what people are talking about and what they are responding to."

Leveraging partnerships is an important avenue that allows NASF to extend its reach to social media channels such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube and renew Smokey's important message of wildfire prevention to Americans, particularly to 18-35 year-old adults. Current public service announcements in the campaign feature a modern version of Smokey Bear with the call-to-action to "Get Your Smokey On." The messages encourage people to speak up if they see someone whose actions might start a wildfire. The campaign has most recently teamed with the Disney Company to issue public service messages featuring Bambi, which reach out to elementary-school children and their parents through new television, radio, outdoor and web ads.

In 2010 the number of fans visiting Smokey's Facebook page passed the 25,000 mark and is still growing. Status posts about wildfire prevention news, trivia questions and open-ended conversations are bringing people to the table to share their experiences and stories with each other—sometimes in languages other than English. In so doing, they are turning the volume up on Smokey's message and sharing it across their own networks.

Three State Foresters serving on the CFFP provide expertise to ensure prevention messages are technically accurate and reflect the regional diversity of fire behavior and occurrence across the country. The association also incorporates fire prevention messages through the work of its standing Fire Committee and through its general communications and policy efforts.

For more information, visit [http://www.stateforesters.org/smokey\\_bear](http://www.stateforesters.org/smokey_bear).



To see Smokey Bear's social media channels, visit:

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

Twitter: [www.twitter.com/smokey\\_bear](http://www.twitter.com/smokey_bear)

MySpace: [www.myspace.com/wildfireprevention](http://www.myspace.com/wildfireprevention)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/smokeybear](http://www.youtube.com/smokeybear)

Mobile: [www.smokeybearmobile.com](http://www.smokeybearmobile.com)

### BLM and the Social Media Push

In July 2010, the Bureau of Land Management entered the realm of social media by creating a presence on the popular websites Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. This push is part of an ongoing effort to reach out and connect with the public in more timely and relevant ways.

"We are excited about using social media to connect with people interested in the management of their public lands," said BLM Director Bob Abbey. "Through such media, the BLM will not only be able to reach more citizens in 'real time,' but also generate instant feedback on the myriad issues facing our agency."

Currently, social media accounts have been set up by the BLM national office in Washington, D.C. State offices and centers have also set up accounts to deal with local and subject-specific issues. BLM at NIFC has established a NIFC Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/BLMFire>) and Twitter account (<http://twitter.com/blmnifc>). A NIFC YouTube site will be available soon. Unfortunately, employees are not able to access these sites from government computers. The Department of the Interior is working to grant access to employees, although access has not been approved yet.

All agencies at NIFC are encouraged to use these sites for fire information, policy updates, announcements, or anything else that our audience may be interested in. The external affairs staff can help anyone at NIFC get information posted on our social media sites.

The NIFC Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts will be a great way to share information as we dive into the social media on the web.



## Social Media and Our National Parks

by Roberta D'Amico

In the simplest terms, the NPS approach to social media mirrors the NPS approach to wildland fire management focusing on the right response at the right time for the right reason. Social media tools (which are no longer “new”) are just additional tools in the communications toolbox. As with any communication effort, the overall strategy, plan and use of a specific tool depends on the response desired, the importance and/or need for timeliness and the reason for use. Of course, implementation of the use of any new tools or techniques is never as simple as it might seem.

Like all of our partners in the interagency arena, the NPS falls within a higher organizational structure that provides policy and direction. The NPS’s Social Media Policy which will be subordinate to the Department of the Interior’s Policy is now in the final review process. Currently under development, and scheduled for release concurrently with the final NPS policy is a document titled *The NPS Guide to Social Media*.

Since no two parks, offices or programs will have the same set of communication priorities; the guide is designed to assist managers and their staffs in identifying best practices for use along with guidance on how to develop local oversight and direction as units incorporate the tools into a larger communications, education, interpretation or resource information sharing strategy.

While social media tools have not and will not replace the need for traditional means of communication and interaction within the NPS, these tools are viewed as methods that can complement the NPS’s overall communication efforts. An ongoing Service-wide priority is to assure that the NPS overall web presence is complete and up-to-date before following the “gold rush” approach to social media sites. Updating to social media tools while neglecting official NPS websites can cause even the best social media strategies to fail, as the user finds no depth beyond the front curtain of social media when seeking further information on a website.

The NPS Wildland Fire community takes great pride in being part of the impetus to implement the use of social media tools within the Service. Three key incidents spurred fire to jump into the social media arena. The first was when the California home of NPS Fire and Aviation Management’s Division Chief was threatened by a wildfire and updated information was more informative and readily available via a variety of non-government sites. The second was the

20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fires in the Yellowstone area and recognizing that our incident communication methods had not progressed significantly since 1988. And the third being the fervent pleas from the field that there was an urgent need to be able to use social media to communicate with our audiences, before, during and after wildland fire activity.

Since the wildland fire group was heavily involved in the development of a strategic communication plan, the timing was perfect to jump into the research and analysis of how to use social media. It was clear that this effort needed to fall within the Service-wide communication efforts and working relationships were quickly established with NPS colleagues in Washington DC in the information technology, web services, interpretation, and communication offices. This resulted in the development of the NPS policy and guide mentioned above.

Social media is an effective method to build communities, both externally and internally, as well as in the virtual and more personal worlds we live in. With proper research, planning, and oversight, these are powerful tools in the communications toolbox. The key is using the right tool at the right time for the right reasons!

To learn more about the NPS Fire and Web 2.0, specifically efforts with Twitter and blogging go to: [http://www.nps.gov/fire/public/pub\\_web2.cfm](http://www.nps.gov/fire/public/pub_web2.cfm) where you can also listen to webinars presented on these two key topics.

The screenshot shows the 'Fire and Aviation Management' website. The main heading is 'PUBLIC AND MEDIA NPS FIRE & WEB 2.0'. Below this, there are several sections of text and links:

- Handblogging - Brief 2008 to a personal Web site:** Provides information on how to use blogging tools for the National Park Service, fire and aviation. Includes a link to a supplemental handbook.
- Blogging 101 Webinar Recording:** Introductory webinar presented on 6/23/2009. Provides background information related to social media and the basics of blogging.
- Blogging 101 Supplemental Handbook:** How to use blogging tools for the National Park Service, fire and aviation. Information regarding blogging tools, applications, terminology, glossary, and more.
- Twitter 101 Webinar Recording:** Introductory webinar presented on 8/11/2009. Provides background information related to social media growth and Twitter beta testing in the National Park Service for summer 2009.
- Twitter 101 Supplemental Handbook:** How to use and apply Twitter for the National Park Service, fire and aviation. Information regarding Twitter tools, applications, terminology, glossary, and more.
- Twitter 101 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs):** Responses to questions asked during June 21 webinar. Link provided in document for remaining questions.
- Avatar and Background Samples:** PSD (Photoshop) and TIF files for creating a profile picture / NPS office avatar and background for NPS Twitter feeds. Internal use only.
- Twitter Beta Testers:** Listing of NPS Twitter beta testers with links to park / office Twitter feeds.
- Twitter Beta Testers Contact List:** Listing of NPS Twitter beta testers and associated contact information. Internal use only.



# Oil Spill Leads FWS to Social Media Use

by Karen Miranda-Gleason

For the last several years, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has explored and tested a variety of emerging media tools to stay relevant and engaged with the public. The most accessible new media tool for agency employees during this time has been Flickr to link photos from news releases and provide the media with easy access to high resolution images. Plans are underway within fire management to build photo collections depicting successional effects of fire, and the co-existence of fire and wildlife.

In October 2005, FWS public affairs specialists across the country formed a New Media workgroup to pilot several small projects, determine appropriate uses of new media tools and technology, and develop a blog policy that is now part of the agency manual. The group is recognized as a standing subcommittee of the agency's Web Council.

The Fish and Wildlife Service, like other agencies, also recognized the value of using Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, though access to these sites was blocked on DOI computers. Though FWS applied to DOI for a waiver to this restriction, efforts to reconfigure the security filters were moving slowly when the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill occurred in April 2010. As one of the lead agencies responding to the incident, FWS could not keep pace with the public need for information without use of social media; it was then granted a temporary waiver to use these sites, with the stipulation they only be used to communicate about the oil spill.

After demonstrating its commitment to use its access to these tools responsibly, FWS was then granted a permanent waiver for public communication via these sites starting Sept. 28, 2010. Since then, all Service employees have been encouraged by the agency's Director to use these tools, as well as Flickr, in accordance with official guidance and management plans developed by FWS External Affairs. FWS social media accounts are managed nationally and by 8 regions, with one official YouTube channel, one national and 8 regional Flickr accounts, 17 Facebook pages and 15 Twitter accounts (for national, regional, and special programs), a national Virtual Newsroom blog, and a blog about activities in the Southwest Region. In keeping with its strategic goal of integration with other Service programs, and due to staffing limitations, the FWS Fire Management Program is striving to post its public outreach materials on these various existing venues, rather than establish and maintain independent accounts. The New Media workgroup's current efforts are focused on testing the next era of new



technologies -- mobile devices -- with content tailored to mobile users. The Service's newly developed stand-alone website on the Mobile Webpage can be quickly downloaded and easily viewed on any mobile phone with internet access. Not only does this platform provide text and images, it also has the ability to provide short snippets of video, photo slideshows, and customized text message alerts, such as the oil spill alert system.

For more information, see [www.fws.gov/home/socialmedia/](http://www.fws.gov/home/socialmedia/).





## GovLoop – What it Is and How it Benefits Agencies

by Tina Boehle

Have you been invited to join GovLoop - Social Network for Government, yet? If not, let this be an open invitation for you to check it out and join. And in answer to your next question – no, it's not like Facebook, though there are a few features that it does have in common with the other social media site.

GovLoop was started in 2008 by Steve Ressler. At the time, he was a government employee, and he thought there was “a need for a social network for the government community to connect and share information.” Today, Ressler is president of GovLoop and is active on the site on a daily basis. On one forum post titled “Introduce Yourself,” Ressler started the discussion with another reason he started GovLoop – “I started GovLoop as a way to connect individuals across the government community and spark conversation. I believe in the wisdom of crowds and together I know we can help improve government and grow our own careers along the way.”

GovLoop is growing and now has over 37,000 members. The site is open to government employees at the federal, state, and local levels, as well as government contractors, and students and individuals interested in government service. That's a pretty wide spectrum of perspectives, experience, and expertise out there waiting to be tapped into.

At last count, there were 863 groups available on GovLoop to join, depending upon your interest, affiliation (agency and position), location, and more. Some groups are on a professional level, such as agency-specific groups of “USDA Forest Service” and “National Park Service,” or “GovLeaders,” for those who are interested in growing as leaders and/or growing the next generation of leaders. Others are based on personal interests including “Gov Gourmet” about food and “Writers” for those interested in all forms of writing; still others based on personal or professional growth, such as the group, “Pursuing a Degree (Bachelors, Masters, PhD).”

Every member has the ability to blog on GovLoop, and it is interesting to read the perspectives of



others out in the government community and participate in topic discussions. One way that blogposts are brought to the attention of the GovLoop community is through a weekly newsletter that comes via e-mail, GovLoop Weekly “Connecting the Government Community.” Disseminated by Ressler, the newsletter has tidbits from recent blogposts and discussions happening on the site. If you don't have a lot of time, which many of us do not, it's a great way to stay connected and see what's happening out in the GovLoop community.

Other menu options besides groups and blogs are links for members, forums, jobs, events, topics, and resources. All of these provide opportunities to interact with a community that wants to be connected with one another, seek efficiencies, get feedback, or just talk and learn, virtually speaking. This is where GovLoop benefits agencies. With 37,000 members, there's plenty of opportunity to bounce an idea off a group or see if someone else has insight into an issue so you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes, just having a set of fresh eyes on a problem or project is all you need. It's taking the concept of crowdsourcing, where you put out an open call for others to assist, but still keep it within a community of peers.

If you haven't checked GovLoop out, take a few minutes and head over to [govloop.com](http://govloop.com) and see what conversations are happening out there and perhaps get involved. Remember, you have that open invitation by me!

GovLoop's home page, located at <http://www.govloop.com>.



## Where We See Social Media Use Going Over the Next Few Years

by Tina Boehle

“Bear with me a moment while I pull out my crystal ball... Ah, here it is... what did you want to know again? Oh, the future of social media? Well, that’s an interesting question...”

Foreseeing into the future isn’t easy, especially with a rapidly changing field of technology used by social media, but there are likely a few things we can pinpoint as definite possibilities.

Geolocation tools, which can pinpoint a user’s location, are going to become more prevalent. Several months ago Facebook launched a new portion of the website for “Places” which allows your location to be known. They weren’t the first ones to have a location-based app; sites like Foursquare, Gowalla, and Yelp, as well as games like Scvngr all existed

prior to Facebook joining the game. Twitter has also added a location option for tweets. So, with Facebook and Twitter now using location-based tools it becomes much more likely that at some point more people will be using them, as you do not have to sign up for yet another service, and your friends are already using the same tool.



The other trend happening is the increased use of smartphones, such as the iPhone, Droid, Blackberry and Touch. The smartphone has been around several years, but more and more cell phone users are moving to smartphones—and using them well beyond phone calls and texting. Smartphones connect users to social media, provide geolocation, let people play sophisticated games, and much, much more. Smartphones are more accurately described as a handheld computer fused with a mobile phone.

An article on the website *Hooked Up* listed ten things that a smartphone can replace. These included GPS, books, digital cameras, video cameras, music players, television, radio, alarm clocks, laptops, and sadly, human companionship. The capability of a smartphone is considerably broadened by using applications, also known as apps (Apple Computer’s App Store currently offers



more than 300,000 apps!). Smartphones will eventually become so complex and integrated that the simple telephone will go the way of a typewriter and a phone booth.

The old crystal ball is a bit dim beyond that. What’s obvious is despite trends, if you’re not ready to go there, you don’t have to jump on board. Though if you want to buy a cell phone that only makes phone calls, you might have some difficulty!

