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## INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

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### SR 530 mudslide and flooding: Using social media to communicate information during a disaster

#### SUMMARY

The SR 530 mudslide and flooding in Washington state destroyed a community, blocked a highway and cut off towns upriver. Snohomish County used social media from the beginning of the disaster to share relevant, credible public information with the community and media. Social media proved invaluable in providing timely information to a broad audience and managing rumor control.

#### DESCRIPTION

The SR 530 slide hit at 10:37 a.m. Saturday, March 22, in Oso, a rural section of central Snohomish County. Thousands of cubic yards of mud spilled out over a square mile, in some areas more than 60 feet deep. The slide destroyed the Steelhead Haven community, blocked the Stillaguamish River and flooded nearby homes, covered State Route 530, and knocked out phone service and cut off the community of Darrington, 15 miles east.



**Heavy equipment at the 530 slide site April 10.** – Bronlea Mishler

Snohomish County activated its Emergency Operations Center (EOC) within a few hours. The first PIOs called into the EOC managed public outreach and social media communication for the county. They immediately began monitoring information and rumors through the county's existing social media accounts: Facebook and Twitter. Knowing that media and the public typically turn to social media first for breaking news, the Public Information Officers (PIOs) made the decision to provide immediate, verified information about the incident from the EOC and incident command to the media and public via the county's Facebook and Twitter pages.

Using social media as the primary outreach tool allowed the county to provide information more quickly, and to a broader audience, than it could have with a traditional press release. The county's existing network of followers on Twitter and Facebook allowed information to reach roughly 3,000 people instantly. Those people then retweeted or shared the information with their followers, exponentially expanding the reach of the county's information. The county did not have to rely on media to push out details about the slide; instead, the county became the best source for reliable, timely incident information.

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Additionally, creating an incident-specific hashtag, #530slide, in the first hours of the incident allowed county PIOs to monitor traffic on social media sites for rumors, misinformation, questions or other slide details. The county continuously pushed out verified information while at the same time reached out to media and the public to answer questions, correct misinformation, address rumors before they got out of hand, and communicate with community members in the affected slide area. While an incident hashtag isn't guaranteed to be successful, using one and monitoring others related to the event are helpful for sharing information and managing rumors.

As the incident progressed, social media became invaluable as a tool to share press releases created by the Joint Information Center, photos taken by JIC staff in the field, links to community resources, and to answer questions posed by media and community members. Media cited tweets or Facebook posts in news reports, and community members shared tweets and posts with their own friends. Many Facebook posts received upwards of 10,000 views, and tweets reached nearly 100,000 people through retweets. For people with limited access to mainstream media, social media became their best source of credible information throughout the nearly 40-day activation of the Snohomish County EOC. Social media continues to be the most effective way to spread information about the 530 slide to the general public.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The public has changed the way it gets its news; traditional media is no longer the sole source of information. At least half of all Twitter and Facebook users get their news on those sites. More than half of all cell phone users get news on their phones. Moreover, the majority of social media news posts are breaking news, and studies show that Twitter plays a key role in sharing pieces of the story as it develops.

Social media is an invaluable and often overlooked tool to gather and share emergency information, and to correct misinformation and rumors. When government agencies engage with the public on social media during an emergency, they broaden their reach and enhance their credibility by providing timely, verifiable information and becoming a trustworthy part of the conversation.

Especially during an emergency, it's essential for government to bring the news to its audience—that means using social media in concert with traditional public outreach methods. Government agencies should have an existing social media presence—via Facebook and/or Twitter—that they can leverage in an emergency. Public Information Officers should work with incident command staff and EOC personnel to verify and share news and photos via social media, answer questions from media and the public, and monitor and correct rumors and misinformation.

We received the following kudos from members of the public regarding our social media work:

"Whoever is doing the rumor, damage control, responding to volunteers who want to self-deploy and all the other offers of help is doing a fantastic job. The rest of us in the region should be watching you so we'll know how to do it when the time comes. Way to get good information to the public!"

-Rachel Myers | Planning Support Manager | Northwest Healthcare Response Network

"I want to ... say you guys are doing a great job of trying to get information out there in tough circumstances. It's appreciated."

-Tracy Vedder, KOMO TV

"@snocounty @EmergencyMgtMag Very helpful to watch how you've handled all this. Our thoughts are with you. #530slide #dial211"

-Tweet from @211HELPLINE

"@snocounty Thank you for your work. I don't know who you are but you are putting out great reports with much humanity included."

-Tweet from Hot Springs County EMA @HSCEMA

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