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## Woodcock engages public with Web 2.0

### Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

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# Woodcock engages public with Web 2.0

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**Download the paper:** [“Leveraging Social Media to Engage the Public in Homeland Security”](#)



When the Technology for Homeland Security class discussed Web 2.0 technology, the topic grabbed Jody Woodcock.

As a program manager with the Pierce County (Wash.) Department of Emergency Management, Woodcock became interested in how to use social networking tools as a public communications method.

“The more I participated in the class discussions, the more I thought maybe there was an opportunity to multiply our eyes and ears in the community and facilitate the situational awareness we always crave,” Woodcock said.

Her course paper led to her thesis on the same topic, titled “Leveraging Social Media to Engage the Public in Homeland Security.”

1. Woodcock observed a public safety community leery of social media.

In her course paper she tapped into research from University of Colorado.

Woodcock noted that the University of Colorado study examined the Virginia Tech shootings of April 2007 and the Southern California Wildfires of 2007. In the Virginia Tech case, social media was utilized by students and residents to exchange information that was well ahead of media and official government reports. The study also found that erroneous information was generally corrected by the informal social networking community. Also, residents in the Southern California wildfire area sought information that was more precisely tailored to their neighborhoods instead of geared toward the larger metropolitan region.

While emergency agencies have embraced sending crucial alerts to their communities, this new model allows people in those communities to share information back in real time.

Woodcock said that provides an element of information that emergency managers crave – enhanced situational awareness.

“Communities have limited public safety resources – we simply can’t be everywhere,” she said. “If we engage our residents to have them become part of the process, we can tap into what people are seeing and hearing. Improved situational awareness leads to more efficient resource allocation and, ultimately, better decisions. People are already sharing this type of information through social media, so I need to be there too.”

2. Mother Nature enabled Woodcock to quickly see the concepts in her paper applied. As she completed the Technology for Homeland Security course and began delving into her thesis, it was flooding season in Pierce County.

The department director gave the go-ahead for a small-scale effort to utilize social media such as Twitter and Facebook to distribute and collect information.

“Because this was a topic I was exploring for my thesis, it gave it a little more credibility,” Woodcock recalled. “For some emergency managers it is difficult put social media in an emergency management context. I just started very simply and wondered, if I had a group of emergency management ‘friends’ on Facebook, what would that do for my organization?”

The answer was that residents were able to identify flooding areas that had yet to come to the attention of the Emergency Management Department. And, the event provided a base to consider expanding use of social media.

3. Woodcock said that there still remains a view among her peers that social media is overwhelming with so many applications available.

“I like the approach of starting small. I don’t need to have information on every social media site. I just need to strategize as to what meets my department’s need,” she said.

To that end, Pierce County will combine social networking with an already established network of neighborhood volunteers.

The county has some 500 neighborhoods with 7,000 people trained not only to respond to incidents in their community, but to collect actionable information and provide situational awareness. These volunteers have already been trained and are trusted by the public safety community.

“We are looking at a strategy to be Facebook friends with these established groups,” Woodcock said. “I liken this concept to a social media version of amateur radio. The participants are just sharing information through a different medium.”

The county hopes to have a Facebook communication program in place for the 2010 fall flood season.

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Associated file: [Leveraging Social Media to Engage the Public in Homeland Security](#)

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