



SOCIALIZING

Adm. Thad Allen and HS3 Luke Thompson illustrate how new tools are allowing people to communicate like never before. Composite photo by PA2 Dan Bender

COAST GUARD

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If you're 20, you had a MySpace page 5 years ago. If you're 40, you didn't know about MySpace until you saw an exposé on the evening news 2 years ago.

The 20-somethings all left home and switched to FaceBook. Their 40-something parents joined to keep tabs on them. The 20-somethings got embarrassed and quit paying attention to their pages. So did their parents. Social media was just a passing fad.

Wrong.

Maybe the story sounds familiar but social media isn't dead just because you might have deleted your profile. When's the last time you watched a video on YouTube? Ever looked at news online and ended up on a blog? Been to Wikipedia? That's social media.

So let's take a moment to dispel the myths and get on the same page. Blogs aren't just for people who live in their parents' basement. Social networking sites aren't only for people looking to "hook up." Social media is much bigger than that. Anywhere on the Web you can leave a comment, post a photo or video, or share an idea is social media. That's a lot of places.

The Coast Guard already has official pages on MySpace, FaceBook, Flickr and YouTube. There's also an extensive U.S.

Coast Guard entry on Wikipedia that covers everything from history and missions to how we know Popeye was a Coastie. So when it comes to social media, the Coast Guard has already made the commitment to be there. This begs the question, why?

The answer is communication.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Half of the 10 busiest websites are social
- YouTube accounts for 10 percent of all internet traffic
- During Hurricane Ike the Coast Guard page was one of the top 20 most visited on YouTube

Sources: technorati.com, youtube.com

Jargon

blog - (a contraction of the term "Web log") a Web site, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. "Blog" can also be used as a verb.

blogosphere - a collective term encompassing all blogs and their interconnections. It is the perception that blogs exist together as a connected community.

RSS - (abbreviation of really simple syndication) a family of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works - such as blog entries, news headlines, audio, and video. They benefit readers who want to subscribe to timely updates from favored websites or to aggregate feeds from many sites into one place. RSS feeds can be read using software called an RSS reader, feed reader, or aggregator, which can be web-based or desktop-based.

social media - primarily Internet-based tools for sharing and discussing information among human beings. The term most often refers to activities that integrate technology, social interaction, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. That covers a lot of ground but its broken down into four basic categories.

1. Communication: blogs, microblogs,

2. Collaboration: wikis, social bookmarking, social news sites and opinion sites: Wikipedia, del.icio.us, Digg,
3. Multimedia: video sharing, photo sharing, livecasting and music sharing: YouTube, Flickr, Justin.tv, imeem
4. Entertainment: virtual worlds, online gaming and game sharing: Second Life, World of Warcraft, Kongregate

Web 2.0 - a living term describing changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to enhance creativity, information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Although the term suggests a new version of the World Wide Web, it does not refer to an update to any technical specifications, but to changes in the ways software developers and end-users utilize the Web.

wiki - is a page or collection of Web pages designed to enable anyone who accesses it to contribute or modify content, using a simplified markup language. Wikis are often used to create collaborative websites and to power community websites. The collaborative encyclopedia Wikipedia is one of the best-known wikis.

Source: wikipedia.com

A third of the country reads blogs. More than a fourth of the country has a profile on MySpace or FaceBook. With numbers like that it's safe to say that social media is a good way to reach out to the public.

"We have to go where the people are," is how LCDR Tony Russell, the commandant's press secretary, explains it.

But reaching the public is only half of the equation. Internal communications also stand to improve with an injection of social media.

A recent example was the response to Hurricane Ike. Leaders on scene were able to conduct their missions and coordinate logistics without intervention from headquarters. This was possible, in part, because everyone was connected through chat rooms. Yes, admirals in chat rooms. As Adm. Thad Allen explains it, in the past there would have been "endless routing

of information through echelons." During Ike, operational commanders were freed from the traditional inefficiencies of the chain of command.

If you're cringing, stop right there: the chain of command still exists. This is an important point because it highlights both potential benefits and challenges to exploiting new forms of communication. The military chain of command is, if nothing else, rigid. Traditionally it goes up and down but, using the Ike model, it can go sideways too. Here the

authority element of the chain remains vertical; commanders still command and everyone knows who they answer to. It's the information portion of the chain that moves horizontally because everyone knows what's happening real-time.

The benefit is responsiveness. Commanders can act quickly when information goes up and down the chain instantaneously. The challenge is changing a culture. The first lesson anyone learns entering the military is how the chain of command works - it goes up and down. Getting senior leaders, enlisted and commissioned, who have relied on the vertical chain for twenty or thirty years to embrace the idea of a horizontal one may be a tough sell - but it's a sell Allen thinks is worth making.

"We are seeing a revolution in how we deal with information management through social media," said Allen.

He's dead serious too. When he created a blog on the uscg.mil site it wasn't just to hear himself type. He wants you and the public to know what he's doing and, more importantly, he wants input.

"It is critically important that the senior leaders of the Coast Guard understand what technology is doing today, how it is changing, and how we must change with it," said Allen. "Social media takes out the middle man and lets interested parties communicate nearly directly with one another."

Social media tools give you the opportunity to engage at an unprecedented level. You can leave a comment on the Commandant's blog - and he'll read it. You can help shape the

the Coast Guard in Web 2.0. In some ways, there's really nothing new here; if you had the authority to talk to a reporter about a specific topic before, you now have that same authority with respect to blogs. Besides common sense, there are some rules for making official Coast Guard comments. For instance, there is a specific disclaimer that must accompany any official comments on a non-Coast Guard site. These specifics are laid out in ALCOAST 458/08 with more guidance on the way.

In other ways, this is the first glint of a tidal wave of change coming over the horizon. This isn't just about whether Seaman Joe is allowed to blog about his job (he is if doesn't bring discredit to the service) or if Lt. Jane should post videos of a rescue while on patrol to the Web (she should as long as there are no legal concerns and her command has cleared it). The official communications described so far represent only a fraction of the information we exchange every day. How will social media affect things like conducting boardings, responding to oil spills or managing personnel? There are clues.

Photos and videos are already being sent straight from the field to command centers on cell phones. When will everyone be issued a smart phone and those photos and videos are posted directly to the Web so everyone from the watchstander at the station to the commandant could see it in a matter of seconds?

The Personnel Service Center in Topeka already has a blog about current pay and personnel issues to keep other yeomen up to speed. When will every rating or specialty keep a blog and instead of quarterly newsletters all you had to do was click

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Coast Guard's presence not just on the Web but how it does business in real life. Have you ever thought you had a better way of doing some part of the Coast Guard's missions? Now there's almost nothing stopping you from sharing that idea with the highest levels of our leadership. And now there's almost nothing stopping you from sharing your thoughts with everyone on the Web.

A recent ALCOAST grants all units the authority to represent

an RSS in your browser to stay current?

Much of how the service ends up engaging within Web 2.0 is up in the air, but the idea of improving communications is driving the initiative. This requires completely rethinking how we do business.

The tidal wave is coming. Running from it will only make staying afloat later more difficult.

It's time to pick up a surfboard. 