

Community Communication During a Natural Disaster: Lessons Learned During the Indian Gulch Fire

**Jacob Smith (with Bill Fisher)
September 2013**

The Indian Gulch Fire west of Golden wasn't the first time a local community relied on social networking tools during a natural disaster and won't be the last, but it was the first time in Golden that the internet played a key role in our communication and outreach efforts during a natural disaster.

The fire started the morning of March 20, 2011. Within 75 minutes of the initial dispatch the Golden Fire Department had deployed multiple crews in Clear Creek Canyon, and crews from Golden, Fairmount, West Metro, Wheat Ridge, and Arvada Fire Departments were staged in Golden's Mountain Ridge subdivision on structure protection assignments. The fire, which lasted about a week, quickly grew into the most significant fire in the country, pulling in hundreds of firefighters, drawing a federal Type 1 Incident Management Team, and threatening hundreds of homes.

Community Communication During the Indian Gulch Fire

The city had the benefit of an emergency operations plan (which had just been updated two months earlier), and a number of Jefferson County agencies, including Golden, had engaged in a large- scale multi-agency emergency operations exercise just one month prior.

The plan, which was quickly deployed as the circumstances of the fire became clear, relied primarily on a traditional communications model: the emergency operations team would compile and verify information about the fire, they would provide it to our public information officer, and she would periodically brief the news media using formal news briefings and by posting written briefings on the city's web site. The city relied largely on the regional news media to broadcast that information via television, radio, and newspaper (as well as the web sites associated with all of those). Because the fire was actually burning in unincorporated Jefferson County, outside the city limits, the county's PIO ended up being the point person but the basic system remained the same.

In addition to these traditional communications channels, a number of less traditional channels would ultimately prove important:

- Three non-city web sites managed by City Councilor Bill Fisher, City Councilor Marjorie Sloan, and me (Mayor Jacob Smith).
- A number of email newsletters and lists, including the city's official system, at least one HOA email list, Judy Denison's "Golden Newsletter," and email newsletters managed by the same three elected officials (City Councilor Bill Fisher, City Councilor Marjorie Sloan, and my "Jacob's Golden Update").
- A number of social networking sites, including the city's Facebook page, Councilor Bill Fisher's Facebook page and Twitter feed, and my Facebook page and Twitter

feed. The information posted on these sites, in turn, was often reposted and shared widely among residents of Golden and elsewhere.

- Comcast's public access cable channel, which the city used for broadcasting information.

During the early hours of the fire, Councilor Fisher and I both relied on the official communications channels to push information out about the fire, and on the traditional news media to then disseminate that information in the community. Within the first twelve hours, however, we realized the official emergency communications system was providing information infrequently (generally twice a day) while we were simultaneously receiving a rapidly increasing number of inquiries about the fire and the evacuation orders. Resident requests for information were becoming more urgent, and it quickly became evident that an official update once or twice a day would not be satisfactory.

In addressing this, I quickly settled on a routine that seemed to work well: I posted whatever information I had on my Facebook page and on Twitter, I would drive around Golden gathering information, and I would then return home to push out another round of Facebook and Twitter updates and to respond to inquiries that had come in during the interim. I repeated this cycle all day, and in the evening I would summarize the status and information of the previous 24 hours in a daily blog/website update and a daily email newsletter. Councilor Fisher simultaneously started taking a very similar approach, and we began to coordinate and share information in subsequent days. Councilor Sloan also distributed information periodically through her website and newsletter, and the other websites, newsletters, and social networking pages all served to further amplify distribution of this information.

Traveling around Golden to gather information was critical. I made frequent stops at the Golden Gate Canyon roadblock, the various staging areas, locations that residents were congregating (such as Mitchell Elementary and local coffee shops), City Hall, and the Emergency Operations Center. I think Councilor Fisher's route was similar, and as a result we were able to learn a great deal about what was happening on the ground, to hear what residents had learned and what they were concerned about, and to share information with everyone we talked to.

The addition of more timely and frequent updates via online social media proved critical to meeting our responsibility to residents. There were several problems in the initial coordinated response, including the initial incorrect evacuation "order" for the Village at Mountain Ridge neighborhood (an understandable error subsequently changed to an evacuation "warning"). However, the problems were relatively minor under the circumstances, and the system – the official information system expanded and amplified by the many quasi-official social media activities – seemed to work well. A very large number of folks expressed their gratitude for the combined communication efforts, often specifically referring to the frequent email newsletters, Facebook posts, and tweets. Similarly, all of the analytics data for the tools I was using showed substantial increases, and I believe the same was true for Bill's feeds as well. Overall, community members seemed very satisfied with the level of communication throughout the fire.

We learned quite a bit about community communications during the fire and, as we head into what appears to be a sustained period of long, challenging fire seasons, we want to share those lessons with the community.

Key Lessons Learned

1. People were hungry for information. The conventional means of staying tuned in – TV, radio, and print media plus their web sites – were useful and helpful, and for some people they seemed to work well. *But many people were really hungry for information (especially those whose homes were at risk), and communication on the conventional channels was too infrequent and incomplete to meet their needs.* This was especially true for the folks who had been issued an evacuation warning preceded by an erroneous evacuation order.

2. Frequency was critical. One thing Golden residents particularly valued about our unofficial communications was the frequency with which we posted information. They wanted to feel in the loop, a desire that was dramatically heightened during the fire. This was true even when we didn't have any new information to share; even just posting that the situation hasn't changed since the last update helped reassure and assuage anxiety among residents.

Equally important was the ability to respond to questions and requests by community members about the situation, and being to post the responses in a way that everyone could benefit from. This significantly augmented the ability of individual residents and members of the press to call the city asking for information, and provided critical information about what residents were concerned about and what information they needed.

3. Physically getting out and making the circuit was critical. By talking face-to-face with people involved in the fire response, we learned a great deal about what was actually happening on the ground, and talking face-to-face with constituents meant we were able to answer their questions and hear what they were most concerned about. Our presence also reassured community members that the city government was assertively looking out for their interests (beyond the work of the emergency responders). Our effective use of social networking tools didn't replace face-to-face communication; it both depended on and amplified it.

Incidental to our original mission, the many emergency personnel I talked with as we made rounds were grateful for shared information as well. They were extremely knowledgeable about and focused on their immediate tactical assignments, but they appreciated learning more about what was happening elsewhere.

4. Doing a good job of gathering and sharing information was time-consuming. I spent about half my time driving around and talking to folks and the other half at my computer (publishing tweets and Facebook posts, responding to Twitter and Facebook messages, creating and publishing my own blog posts and email newsletters, and responding to email and phone messages). This was essentially a full-time job. Councilor Fisher and I would have saved a lot of time had we simply repeated the information distributed through official channels, but our efforts would have been much less valuable to

the community.

5. *Speed vs. accuracy.* The city has a legitimate interest in carefully validating information before distributing it in order to ensure its accuracy. As the city's own evaluation report acknowledges, however, this interest is often at odds with the strong desire on the part of community members to receive frequent updates.

The pace with which residents themselves share information, whether or not city sources provide any information, further complicates this. To offer one example, when firefighters began laying hose in a residential neighborhood everyone in that neighborhood knew about it very quickly through their own word-of-mouth communication. The likelihood of inaccurate information spreading amongst neighbors, and perhaps more widely, is much higher if the city doesn't proactively report on those types of activities.

In other words, *it may be that there is no longer an effective way for cities to attempt to validate and control the flow of information into the community.* Through a combination of official channels and unofficial but credible sources (like City Council members), *the city needs to be able to share information more quickly than the traditional vetting process accommodates.* If they don't, the information will still find its way out but may have decreased reliability and may actually cause increased consternation and confusion among the very audience the City is seeking to assuage.

Councilor Fisher and I weren't official voices of the City of Golden, but we had enough credibility that our information was taken seriously. We were both diligent about checking our facts before hitting 'send,' and we always tried to make sure the info we posted was accurate (and the only error I'm aware of was the result of an error in an official news release). The city will need to think about how best to maintain high accuracy while dramatically speeding up the distribution cycle.

6. *The emergency response itself was excellent.* Because the city staff (plus Jeffco and the federal team after they arrived) was doing such a great job dealing with the fire itself, it meant that Councilor Fisher and I could focus more on communication and on the needs of our community members. This enabled us to communicate with staff about issues that needed more attention or about information gaps that might not have been as important from the "protect people and homes" perspective but helped reduce the uncertainty among residents.

7. *Limited information sources.* Many folks seemed primarily plugged in to just one or two information sources, not a wide array of sources. This means that, for folks concerned about distributing information and listening to community questions and concerns, relying on a wide range of channels is really important. For some, the traditional media channels were the most important (where the city's official communications efforts worked really well), for others it was email newsletters, and for others it was Facebook or Twitter. Unfortunately, while there are ways to streamline the process (e.g., repurposing content across channels), every additional channel adds time and effort.

8. Facebook and Twitter were the main tools for quick, frequent updates.

Facebook and Twitter both worked really well for this purpose. Both Councilor Fisher and I noticed that a bunch of folks signed up for our tweets during the fire that were new to Twitter (or had signed up previously but hadn't been active), which implied that they started using it because of the fire.

Another reason both were useful: they were both very transparent, meaning that everyone could see what questions were asked and see the answers. That made them much more efficient than email and it made it much easier for Councilor Fisher and I to hear what community members were saying and asking, which in turn enabled us to figure out where the anxieties and information gaps were. These social media tools turned out to be great for both pushing information out *and* for hearing what was going on among residents. That our posts were so easy to re-post and distribute further extended the importance of these tools.

9. Email newsletters also played a central role. Despite how useful Facebook and Twitter were, my email newsletter was a key supplement because many people in Golden aren't using those social media tools. I received an enormous amount of favorable feedback about the email newsletters. For people who otherwise relied primarily on traditional news media, the email newsletters were extremely important information sources because reporting by traditional sources tended to be short on the details of concern to Golden residents. Even among people who were plugged in through social networks, the email updates provided an end-of-day summary that was apparently really useful. One key point: it would have been very difficult to build an email list after the fire started; although I believe we all saw an uptick in subscriptions, the power of the email lists (Judy Denison's, mine, etc.) stemmed from already having them in place. During a crisis probably isn't the best time to build a social media strategy.

10. The social networks amplified themselves. Those social network participants themselves amplified the information flow on Facebook and Twitter considerably. Tweets were retweeted, blog post links were shared, email newsletters were forwarded, and so on. This dynamic has some risks: Councilor Fisher and I (and perhaps city staff as well) felt a need to stay plugged in to catch any inaccurate information or growing rumors. On the other hand, it meant that key information about the fire, evacuation alerts, and so on was really amplified across the community. Communication efforts during the fire were truly a shared community undertaking.

11. Quick responses to questions were important. Responding quickly to questions by email, social media, and phone was also an important part of addressing anxiety and uncertainty among community members.

12. Tag team. Councilor Fisher and I were generally able to tag team on our efforts, so most of the time at least one of us could push breaking news or new information out as soon as we got it. Notably, both the city and Jeffco ramped up their nontraditional communication efforts as well, which made a difference. They also worked with us to develop some new means of addressing resident concerns, including scheduling a fire information officer to be available at a specific convenience store parking lot for a few

hours one afternoon (which attracted a great deal of resident interest).

Conclusion

Emergency management strategies place a premium on command and control, with very clear lines of responsibility and authority. This model has traditionally included the communications element of those strategies, in part to ensure careful vetting and validation of information prior to its release. The intended gain is highly accurate information, while the cost is a much slower distribution cycle.

The growing challenge for emergency response agencies and for governments more generally is that information – especially during a crisis – will flow quickly through a community whether that information is government-sanctioned or not. There will always be people in a community with access to information and with credibility and reach among residents (freelancing City Councilors being a prime example) who will gather and share information. And during a crisis, huge numbers of other residents will also gather and share information.

The city's concerns about maintaining a high level of accuracy are certainly valid, especially as those information flows become more decentralized. But the faster and more frequent distribution that Councilor Fisher and I were able to achieve by simply gathering information and reporting it (without “official” status but also avoiding the much slower review process that official communication required) doesn't necessarily mean less accurate information. Ironically, I believe the only incorrect information we disseminated during the entire Indian Gulch Fire was the result of an error in an official press release (referring the size of the fire).

Critically, we believe that if the government's response is to tighten its communication strategy – maintaining a slow communications cycle and trying to clamp down on information it hasn't “approved” – it will become decreasingly credible as a source and exercise even less control over the information spreading through the community it is charged with protecting.

Primary Recommendation: the City of Golden and other local governments must find ways to vet and share information more quickly while simultaneously supporting credible voices in the community (e.g., the mayor and city councilors), especially those with strong communications networks (e.g., email newsletters and Facebook followers). During non-crisis periods, municipalities should continue working to develop increased outreach opportunities with citizens.

These challenges aren't unique to crisis situations nor to local governments. These are the same types of changes that every kind of organization is facing as communication networks become decentralized yet still incredibly far-reaching. Command and control simply doesn't work as a communications paradigm when the users/residents/customers are perfectly capable of communicating in highly effective ways without (or even in opposition to) official channels.

To put it another way, if the City of Golden wants the information it distributes to remain credible and relevant to community members, it will have to increasingly structure its communication efforts around what the end users (i.e., community members) want and less around what's convenient for the city itself. The challenges to this shift are as much cultural as they are mechanical.

The good news is that the city and community, during the Indian Gulch Fire, made it up as we went along and found effective ways to accomplish this. Between the efforts of the city and the county (both traditional and the growing use of social media tools), elected representatives, and other community members, we collectively did a strong job of gathering and sharing information and addressing the concerns of community members. The key challenge for the city now is to embed this type of diverse, much less hierarchical communications strategy into its emergency operations plan.

Postscript

The lessons we drew from the Indian Gulch Fire experience still hold today: community members will find and share information at a much faster pace than traditional government communications structures are designed to accommodate, and local government folks must either engage in these conversations or become less and less relevant on the communications front.

Bill and I have noticed some interesting new developments, however, especially around the development of new tools for using social media, mobile devices, and other internet-based strategies during natural disasters. For instance, two Colorado Springs-based software developers created the Waldo Canyon Fire Tracker (<http://theupstart.co/18663/how-we-built-it-the-waldo-canyon-fire-app/>), a web-based app designed to aggregate information and support people impacted by that fire, and the number of stories describing the use of these sorts of tools continues to grow (this infographic describes some of those trends: <http://connectedcops.net/2013/07/18/social-media-is-the-new-face-of-disaster-response/>).

Appendix I: Community Survey

After the Indian Gulch Fire was largely over, I conducted an online survey to learn more about how community members kept abreast of developments during the fire. Of the 239 respondents, approximately 90% were Golden residents. A large majority (70.7%) of respondents were from north or central Golden neighborhoods within the city limits.

The key findings:

Email newsletters were important to a large majority (70.8%) of respondents.

It is critical to note that these newsletters had all been operating for years before the fire, so they all had already established a regular user base before the fire.

Well over half did not use Facebook as a source of information, but ***more than 20% found Facebook to be an important source of information.***

The trend with Twitter was similar but more dramatic: more than 70% indicated that they did not use Twitter at all, but more than 20% found it to be an important source of information.

Print versions of newspapers were generally unimportant to respondents, and more than 40% said they didn't use newspapers at all. Television newscasts (47.9%), neighbors (39.7%), and online newspapers (36.6%) were important information sources.

The city's and county's official web sites were important sources of information as well (63%), but less so (surprisingly) than email newsletters.

The percentage of people who didn't use them at all was also in the 20s. Use of non-official web sites (e.g., www.SmithforGolden.com) was nearly identical (61.5%).

Reverse 911 was important to about 35% ***but nearly 60% indicated that they didn't use the system at all.***

The survey asked respondents how they found answers to specific questions they had during the fire: Online searches was the most common strategy (59.2%), followed by calling/email a member of City Council or the mayor (9%), email city staff - (6.5%), asking questions using Twitter (7.2%), and using Facebook to ask questions (6.1%).

Predictably, the use of local television newscasts for staying on top of local news went up during the fire but only by about 20%. Similarly, the number of people who typically use print newspapers to stay abreast of local news dropped significantly during the fire. In both cases, ***people appear to have shifted to other more real-time information sources for that time period,*** and we saw comparable increases in the use of local news web sites, Facebook, and especially Twitter. Even community email lists (which about 88% of respondents indicated were important news sources before the fire) went up (to about 94%). This was true despite that most of the email lists weren't publishing more than one email a day, suggesting that either that readers trusted the source more than local television

news and print newspapers or that email newsletters were offering more information of value.

Very few people indicated that they used any particular source only a small amount. Most people reported either not using a particular source at all or found that source to be moderately important or extremely important. This was true of highly popular information sources, like email newsletters: 82.5% found email newsletters to be moderately or extremely important, 9.4% didn't use them at all, and 8% found them to be minimally-to-moderately important. It was also true of less popular sources. Thirty-four percent found Facebook to be moderately or extremely important, 56.2% reported not using it at all, and 9.8% found it to be less than moderately important.

More than 40% of respondents indicated that they used a smartphone or other mobile device to access information about the fire.

Interestingly, ***the experience of the Indian Gulch Fire didn't seem to have much impact on long-term information consumption habits.*** Many people reported returning to whatever information and news sources they were relying on before the fire. I suspect that during the next major community crisis we will see more people turn more quickly to social media sources. The survey responses suggest that some people became regular Twitter users as a result of the fire but not many.

The survey respondents included a number of comments and suggestions for improving communications during future incidents. Here are some representative comments:

- “The first reverse-911 call was problematic. The message wasn't very clear about what exactly it was telling people to do nor was it clear about why they were being asked to do it.”
- “The reverse-911 calls should include a time stamp.”
- “It would be helpful if there were a way to test whether the reverse-911 system is working with your phone.”
- There were many compliments for the Golden Fire Department and the Golden Police Department.
- “The television news wasn't very helpful; it mostly included dramatic images without useful content.”
- “Online news often lagged behind the news reported through the community email lists.”

**Appendix II: “Golden, Colorado Indian Gulch Fire
provides key lessons for emergency communication”**



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Golden, Colorado Indian Gulch Fire provides key lessons for emergency communication

April 07, 2011

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On [March 20 a wildfire called the Indian Gulch fire](#) broke out near Golden, Colorado. This incident as explained by [Jacob Smith, mayor of Golden in a blog post](#) highlights beautifully some of the most important and challenging issues of emergency communications today.

Specifically, there are two "burning" issues at play in this very enlightening blog post. One, what is needed to tell the story of an event like this? Traditional media, social media, both? And who should tell it--the PIO as designated and authorized under NIMS? Or elected officials--as practiced by most jurisdictions including by the president in the Gulf Spill?

In this fire, according to Smith, the emergency communications for the fire operated according to plan:

The plan, which was quickly pulled off the shelf and deployed as the circumstances of the fire became clear, relied primarily on a traditional communications model: the emergency operations team would compile and verify information about the fire, and they would provide it to our public information officer so that she could periodically brief the news media (with formal briefings and by posting written briefings on the city's web site). The city would then rely largely on the media to then broadcast that information via television, radio, and print media (as well as the web sites associated with all of those). Because the fire was actually burning in unincorporated Jefferson County, outside the city limits, the county's PIO ended up being the point person but the basic system was the same. Both Jeffco and Golden also added tweets to their outgoing communications toolbox, as well.

I'm guessing this is pretty much what most communities emergency communication plan looks like. And, it looks like it went pretty well. But, if you read the rest of Smith's post, you will see that to a large degree the official communication was a bit of a sideshow compared to the communication that was being provided "unofficially" by the Mayor via social media.

Councilor Bill Fisher and I then expanded that communications and outreach net. We started by posting much more frequent updates to our individual Facebook and Twitter accounts. We supplemented that information with periodic email updates to our newsletter lists. In my case, that was usually once a day late in the evening, which afforded me a chance to summarize the key

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information of the day for folks who hadn't been able to keep up through other means and to offer some more background and detail. Bill and I independently (and then sometimes together) also traveled around town, stopping by the Golden Gate Canyon roadblock, the various staging areas, some of the areas that residents were congregating, and the Emergency Operations Center. We were able to learn more about what was happening on the ground, to hear what residents had learned and what they were concerned about, and to share information with all of those folks. We were posting periodically to our web sites as well.

So here is the picture. You've got the Unified Command (assuming it was set up since it was JeffCo and Golden together) PIO feeding info to the media. You've got the mayor and a councilor running around, checking on things and providing a continual feed of information about what they are observing through a variety of channels, but primarily Facebook, Twitter, email and their website.

The outcome? Here are a few selected observations from the mayor: (boldface by the Mayor)

*The conventional means of staying tuned in – TV, radio, and print media plus their web sites – were useful and helpful, and for some people they seemed to work well. **But many people were really hungry for information (especially those whose homes were at risk), and the conventional channels were too infrequent and incomplete enough to meet their needs.***

[using Facebook and Twitter] *this made it much easier for Bill and I to listen to what community members were saying and asking, and that made it easier to figure out where the anxieties and information gaps were. These social media tools turned out to be great for both pushing information out and for hearing what was going on among residents.*

There was a huge amount of information flowing on Twitter, Facebook, and the web independent of the official news releases: *reporters and especially just people who had information and stories they wanted to share. On the one hand, we needed to stay plugged in to catch any inaccurate information and to notice what rumors or fears were beginning to pick up steam so we could address them. On the other hand, it meant that key information about the fire, evacuation alerts, and so on was really amplified across the community. I know that Bill and I (as well as our city staff and Jeffco folks) were able to get important information to a lot of people, but the fact that everyone else was sharing and spreading meant that it got to even more people. Communicating really was a shared, community effort.*

There is much more valuable information and insights that the mayor shares on his blog--it is well worth the read (thanks Matt for sending it). But it raises some very important questions?

- Were the mayor and the councilor outside of the bounds of NIMS? Clearly they were not getting information approved by Unified Command prior to release and NIMS is very specific about Command authority over response information.
- If they had submitted to the approval process, could they have kept the community so well informed?
- How can there be a "single voice" the NIMS/ICS doctrine with the Joint Information Center when unofficial or unauthorized officials (electeds, politicians, etc.) can freelance like this and fill the gaps?
- Given that the media gets most of their information from the most immediate sources--typically now social media because it is instantaneous--if an "official voice" (the mayor) is providing this, doesn't this make the PIO and Unified Command irrelevant in providing response information?

Don't get me wrong. I am not criticizing the mayor in this one bit. I think he did a heck of a job. But this event and how the communication was handled demonstrates just how out of touch the NIMS, information approval, one voice, Joint Information Center ideas and constructs have become in the instant news, social media-driven information environment.

As someone actively writing crisis communication plans for both large corporations and major government agencies, I struggle with this every day. I am committed to NIMS compliance, but every day that goes by I see more and more of a gap emerging. The role of politicians in communicating about major events is one extremely important element. NIMS-ICS essentially ignores this reality. But as the Coast Guard ISPR demonstrated, it was politics and politically-driven communication that pushed NIMS out of the gulf spill response. It is very interesting to me that in this Indian Gulch incident, so much of the high value communication came from a talented, savvy elected official whose website is called Jacob Smith for Golden. (I'd sure vote for you Mr. Smith--have you thought about going to Washington?) But, important issues are raised that should cause some significant thought and discussion with anyone concerned about NIMS and Joint Information Center-based emergency communication.

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Meade Co. Emg. Mgmt | Commented April 7, 2011

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