# 4.1 Social Media Tip Sheet

**Purpose**: This tool addresses frequently asked questions (FAQs) about social media, specifically about using social media as a “point-to-all” communication tool for emergencies.

**Directions**: Different age groups and cultures will have different understandings and experiences with social media. Use the FAQs below to facilitate discussions among network members on the use of social media for the network.

## What is social media?

**Does the public sector use social media in emergencies?**

**Yes. Some examples:**

**American Association of State Highway Transportation** Officials reports that 82% of responding state DOTs use Twitter.

**The American Red Cross** has a blog and uses Flickr, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, and other platforms. Learn more at [http://ww.redcross.org/connect/](http://www.redcross.org/connect/)

Numerous local and state emergency management agencies are now using Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

**Who uses wireless Internet technology?**

Internet use continues to increase annually among all demographics regardless of age, gender, income, or racial or ethnic group according to studies conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Social media are media that allow easy online publishing (or posting) and social interaction (sharing text, photos, and videos). Social media are interactive and web-based. Examples: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Yammer.

## Why use social media to pass along important information about transportation options in an emergency?

Emergency circumstances (loss of power, lack of available staff or resources) may make it difficult to execute a typical point-to-point communication plan. Social media provide an alternate way to reach network members and vulnerable populations in an emergency. Social media have the potential to reach many people quickly through devices, such as mobile phones, which, *for a period of time,* can function without power.

**How is social media like or unlike a mass notification system?**

Social media outreach is like mass notification in that one individual or organization can reach multiple individuals at once through a single communication method. Yet social media outreach is different than other mass notification systems in that:

* Social media messages will only reach those individuals who have subscribed in advance of the emergency and who have access to the necessary technology and applications
* Recipients of the notification can “talk back” to the leader and often the whole group

**What equipment and skills are needed to use social media?**

The equipment needed could be any mobile phone or device with an Internet connection. Examples include mobile phones/hand-held devices (smartphones like iPhone, BlackBerry or Droid), portable gaming devices (PlayStation, Game Boy), game consoles (Xbox, Wii) and/or desktop and laptop computers.

No special skills are needed beyond basic computer skills (typing and clicking to navigate the screen), but network members will need to invest a bit of time experimenting with and learning how to use the applications.

**What’s the best way to…**
**… Practice?**
Sign up for personal accounts on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc., to see how these tools are being used. Listen to ongoing conversations before contributing. Then just do it.

**… Promote?**
Many methods exist to let community members know a communication network is using social media. Here are a few easy ways to get started:

* **Add logos** of social media that you use to all of your communication network materials, communications, website, and signs. When doing so, invite people to join the group or follow the network.
* **Use the tool** to directly reach out to people who are already on social media.
* **Tell network members** during ongoing face-to-face meetings and conversations.

**…Get feedback?**
To get feedback about the value of a social media presence, follow these tips:

* **Ask.** Solicit feedback in
face-to-face conversations and online. Be prepared to follow up.
* **Use polls and surveys** to gain answers to specific questions.
* **Monitor** how often network social media participation generates action. Are people responding? Is interaction participatory?
* **Review statistics** associated with the social media tool. Any social media tool will have its own metrics for success.

**What are the advantages of using social media?**

Social media reach multiple people through one communication – all at once. Social media reach parts of the community directly rather than relying on other people or systems to do so. Social media offer an opportunity for two-way communication because recipients can respond easily. Two-way communication can generate real-time intelligence for network members.

**What are the potential challenges?**

A few of the challenges may include:

* **Reach.** Access to social media depends on the use of Internet-enabled equipment. Some people may not have technologies, such as Internet-enabled mobile phones, although a majority do. Make certain that alternate methods of outreach are available for people who cannot use or choose not to use the selected social media.
* **Weather.** If weather damages cell phone towers, mobile devices and smartphones will not work. In some cases, cell phones may work while other channels do not. Redundancy is important in emergency planning. In some cases, text messages can send when voice messages and other options cannot.
* **Sensitivity.** Because content posted on social media is available to anyone (any user could easily share the content with anyone). Social media is permanently recorded; extra care must be taken in developing the content or message.
* **Feedback.** Users of a group will have the ability to “talk back.” Emergency leaders need to be prepared to answer questions or respond to critiques without getting overwhelmed. The feedback loop on social media may help clarify messages and direction and allow leaders to respond directly.

**What should the communication network consider when deciding whether to use social media?**

Consider opportunities, limitations, risks, and how to issue clear usage guidelines and expectations within the user community. Consider staff time needed to support the effort.

**How can the network create guidelines or policies to guide use of social media?**

Discuss as a network what the group wants to achieve through social media. Set a timeframe and benchmarks for success. Define social media goal(s). Examples of possible social media goals include the following:

* Better recognition
* Improved quality assurance
* Become a trusted source of information within a community
* Provide better education to community members
* Improve engagement with personnel
* Increase personal involvement in the organization
* Raise money for capital equipment purchases
* Educate policy makers
* Create policies to keep messaging aligned with the goals