

PIER Strategic Services White Paper

National Incident Management System & Social Media

**ABOUT PIER**

PIER (Public Information Emergency Response) is the premier web-based communication management system available. Used by large federal agencies, Fortune 100 companies, major universities



and state and local government agencies, PIER facilitates the management of media, stakeholder, employee, group and public information.

Designed specifically for managing large-scale events in an ICS/Joint Information Center setting, PIER is the leading NIMS compliant JIC management system.

Key Functions:

- Information Gathering
- Collaborative Document Production
- Approval Process
- Email Distribution
- Notification (text messaging and text-to-voice telephone)
- Complete web content management
- Media/Blog/Broadcast Monitoring
- Inquiry Management
- WebEOC Integration

Twitter, Social Media and the Problems of NIMS Compliant Joint Information Center Operations

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Twitter and other social media technologies are rapidly being adopted by corporations, government agencies and other organizations. The use of Twitter in particular has gotten the attention of emergency management and crisis communication professionals because of its ability to very quickly disseminate updates about an incident. Many noted the use of Twitter by reporters in events such as Hurricane Ike and by Public Information Officers in agencies such as the Los Angeles Fire Department in the fall 2008 wildfires. FEMA recently announced its new multi-media communication channels including use of YouTube to distribute video content of response activities.

These new technologies are significantly enhancing the capability of agencies to respond with fast updates of information. But, without the appropriate policies and procedures in place, agencies using these tools in an Incident Command System and Joint Information Center environment may run afoul of basic National Incident Management Systems requirements.

The simple problem is information discipline. The greater underlying problem is how this necessary information discipline interferes with the very spirit and intent of social media.

What is information discipline in a Joint Information Center environment and why is it so important?

Those familiar with Joint Information Systems (JIS) and Joint Information Center (JIC) operations may want to skip over this simple introduction. The JIC was created out of

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- Post-Media World Media Training
- Crisis Response
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PIER DRILL SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Planning
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the Incident Command System (ICS), which itself evolved out of the joint operations of agencies fighting wildfires in the west in the 1970s. ICS solves several problems that naturally occur when different organizations or agencies come together to respond jointly to a major event. It solves the problem of who is in charge, how the response team will be organized, what the specific job functions of each responder are, and how decisions will be made and implemented effectively when you have so many ad hoc participants from many different agencies. It places control of the response in the hands of an Incident Commander who has full authority. When different agencies are involved who have regulatory authority over the response, the potential conflicts are resolved by forming Unified Command, a single command structure incorporate Incident Commanders from the lead private organization involved (if involved) plus the lead local, state, federal and tribal agencies. There is strong incentive for this group to operate together but if that fails, the Federal On Scene Commander (FOSC) has ultimate authority.

The Joint Information Center is the communication arm of the response and all its activities fall under the authority of the Incident Commander or Unified Command. The rule is simple—no information can be released to anyone outside the response without the approval of the IC/UC. The JIC and communication function is led by the Public Information Officer, a member of the Command Staff, and the one responsible for meeting the information requirements of the response and insuring information discipline. This also means that all agencies participating in the response can release information only through the Joint Information Center. Subverting this removes the control dedicated to the Incident Commander, and undermines a fundamental benefit of the JIC—the ability of the response to speak with a single voice.

While the Incident Command System dates back to the 1970s, and the Joint Information Center was first codified in the National Response Team JIC Model developed in 2000, these processes were enforced by the Federal Government through the National Incident Management System developed in 2003. The Department of Homeland Defense mandated its use by any government agency in the country receiving federal funds. This means that any response by any local or state agency uses the ICS and JIC processes and particularly when more than one agency is involved in responding.

The result of all this simple: any multi-agency response requires the use of the JIC and the Public Information Officer managing the JIC must insure that information discipline



PIER Strategic Services' consulting staff have been involved in a large number of drills and responses including:

- oil spills
- shipping disasters
- wildfires
- hurricanes
- drought
- online attacks
- senior management criminal
- space and aircraft accidents
- industrial explosions
- facility siting & expansions
- environmental protests
- labor strikes
- international summits
- and much more...

with Incident Commander approval is maintained. Communication about the response outside of the JIC and without IC/UC approval violates the NIMS requirements.

Information Discipline and Social Media

The problem with using social media technologies such as Twitter and YouTube in a Joint Information Center may now be more obvious. The very concept works against the idea of information discipline. Twitter enables anyone with email access or a cell phone with text messaging capability to instant add content to a website. YouTube similarly allows anyone from a web browser to submit videos for distribution to anyone on the Internet. While these and other social media technologies make it remarkably easy for anyone to share information widely, that ability can undermine the efforts to maintain information discipline.

Information discipline is critical for Incident Commanders and Public Information Officers. First, because it is a critical part of NIMS compliance. You cannot meet the requirements of the National Incident Management System relating to public communication without adhering to Incident Commander approval of publicly distributed information. It is also critical because great damage can be caused by failure to adhere to this requirement. One of the most noted cases of loss of information discipline in a Joint Information Center environment was the Sago Mine incident of January 2, 2006. In this case a garbled cellphone message from rescuers deep in a mine was heard by a member of the communication team in the Joint Information Center. He understood it to say that the trapped miners had been found alive. In complete violation of JIC protocols, he contacted a family member waiting in the church nearby and told them the good news. It was immediately spread to great celebration in the church and almost immediately after that to the world through the media. The problem was it wasn't true. He had misunderstood the radio message. Unfortunately, the Incident Commander made a bad situation worse by waiting until 3:00 a.m., over three hours later, to correct the misinformation.

Clearly there was much unnecessary pain associated with this failure to maintain information discipline. The reputation of the mining company and the entire response team was damaged significantly by this failure. Trust and credibility were lost and once lost those are very difficult to regain. ([For more information refer to the PR Tactics article of February, 2006: "The Sago Mine Tragedy: Making a Bad Story Much Worse."](#))

- *“It is apparent to anyone aware of both the phenomenon of social media and Joint Information Center operations that there is a built-in conflict.”*

In an interview the day before he left his position as Deputy Administrator for FEMA on January 19, 2009, Admiral Harvey Johnson explained why the Coast Guard has an excellent reputation which FEMA does not share. While Admiral Johnson, formerly with the Coast Guard, pointed to several key factors, including a difference in mission, one factor he noted was information discipline. The Coast Guard’s policy is to enable all staff to be spokespersons, but their comments are strictly limited to their individual areas of responsibility. Consequently, only a very few can speak for the agency as a whole. FEMA does not have this same level of information discipline and often is burdened with contradictions, inconsistencies and the problems of not speaking with a single voice. Information discipline in this way is closely tied to freedom to communicate, but is effective only when all participants clearly understand the limits and respect them.

Instant Information and the Information Discipline Conundrum

It is apparent to anyone aware of both the phenomenon of social media and Joint Information Center operations that there is a built in conflict. Joint Information Center processes to a certain degree belong to an older world of mainstream media dominated information. Most involved in JICs still tend to view the job of the JIC is primarily to prepare press releases, distribute those to the media, answer reporter questions and schedule and manage press conferences. The basic understanding is that the Incident Commander can control the information flow about the event because only those involved in the response have access to the event details and therefore they can control the timing of that information as well.

That picture does not conform to today’s reality of information distribution about an event. In today’s social media instant news world, anyone with any access to information about an event will be a “broadcaster.” When a large propane tank exploded in Tacoma, Washington the explosion was caught on a cell video camera. The photographer sent it to the local TV station which used the grainy but spectacular explosion for days to pull viewers into their newscasts. He could just as easily have uploaded it to YouTube and distributed to even potentially larger audiences than a regional tv station. A more recent propane tank explosion in Toronto provided one of the earlier examples of Twitter being used to report the news. Eyewitnesses “tweeted” and these short descriptions were picked up by news reporters as well as many twitter followers. Due the viral nature of social media, the audience for those updates grew very quickly. Today it is commonplace for reporters to be using internet search tools



- *Social Networks have become primary destinations for a rapidly expanding universe of online users to manage and enrich their digital lifestyles both personally and professionally. In June 2008, unique monthly visitors to social networks represented approximately two-thirds of the world's Internet audience.(i) Based on the projected growth of the global Internet audience, IBM estimates that by 2012, the number of unique monthly visitors to online social networking sites will surpass 800 million.*

Source: "IBM Urges Communication Providers to Embrace Social Networking," January 28, 2009, Marketwire

and special Twitter monitoring tools such as twitscoop.com to, in effect, be at the scene of whatever is happening in mere seconds. No longer dependent on news helicopters to arrive quickly on the scene, reporters are enlisting the millions of "citizen journalists" with cell phones to provide instant updates directly from the scene of an incident.

This means that the Joint Information Center has less control over the information flow relating to an event than ever. It also means that the information flow from the JIC will quickly become irrelevant if it does not keep pace with the latest information coming from sources outside the response. This is a very difficult dilemma. There is no point in a Joint Information Center at all if it is too slow to get information out so that no one will even pay attention. Yet, to get information out at the speed of the eyewitnesses using the latest social media tools means completely revising the existing processes and procedures. How can you be fast enough to meet the demands for instant information and still meet the requirement for information discipline?

The answers are found in re-evaluating the Four Ps of Preparedness: **Policies, Plans, People and Platform.**

Revising Joint Information Center Policies and Operational Plans

There is no hope of making the necessary changes unless both Public Information Officers and Incident Commanders understand the dilemma of today's information management. They must understand that they cannot control the information about an event. There are too many sources who stand outside their control perfectly willing and eager to share what they know, and even more, what they think about what is going on. A vacuum of information created by slow updates from the JIC will be instantly filled by anyone else who has relevant information. It means delaying release of information or slowing the process in order to "get it right" means the JIC will be irrelevant, an exercise in futility. Even worse, if the information coming from the JIC is out of date and clearly inaccurate based on easily verifiable facts (such as confirming number of injured or fatalities), the JIC will not only be irrelevant, it will lose credibility and not be seen by the public or the media as a reliable source of current information.

Overcoming this dilemma and operating the response and the Joint Information Center in a way that meets today's extremely high demands for instant, direct and transparent information starts with a clear understanding of the objectives. A successful response

will result in improved trust in leaders and the organizations involved. It is critical for Incident Commanders and the agency leaders who put their trust in them, to understand that trust depends both on an effective response and on effective communication about that response. Responders involved in the *Cosco Busan* oil spill in San Francisco Bay in November, 2007, will generally agree that the response to this spill was quite effective. However, the media coverage tended to be very negative, resulting in loss of confidence in the agencies responding and the loss of position of senior leadership. Lives may be saved, the environmental damage may be minimized, cleanup may be fast and efficient—but if the entire focus of the media, including social media, is on the lapses and failures that they find, trust is lost regardless of the excellence of the response.

Personal experience in a major oil spill drill in 2008 highlighted the need for Incident Commander understanding of the public information environment and the need to significantly re-think JIC policies and operations. The PIO was following standard JIC procedures of focusing efforts on a two to three hour cycle of press releases. The Responsible Party Incident Commander held up one of those critical releases for over two hours, sending it back for no less than six revisions, all related to word-smithing and none related to factual information changes. In the real world, his concern about capturing the tone of the Unified Command just right, would have made the Joint Information Center completely irrelevant or would have lost the response credibility as information updates were provided by other non-response sources.

To solve this problem, the following steps must be implemented by today's Public Information Officers and Incident Commanders:

- ***Fast approval of individual facts***
- ***Increased autonomy while maintaining information discipline***
- ***Continuous web updates***
- ***Maintain full spectrum monitoring***
- ***Make use of appropriate social media technologies***
- ***Extend the life of the JIC***

Fast Approval of Individual Facts

Despite the need for speed, it is still very important that facts coming out of the Joint Information Center be accurate. There are critical facts upon which the credibility of the

JIC as an information source depends—these are the ones that the Incident Commander needs to be concerned about. The size and scope of the incident, the reality of its impact on people's lives and property, the safety of those impacted and the responders, the immediate activities and plans of the response team: these must be communicated in a simple, straightforward and factual method. The best way to do this is for the JIC to have a well-organized information gathering function that incorporates all aspects of the response and includes external information from related organizations such as hospitals. Any relevant fact needs to be checked with the appropriate section of the response, then verified with the IC/UC as soon as possible. Incident Command can then do its own verification or make certain that the PIO has confirmed it to their satisfaction, then it needs to be approved for immediate distribution. Once approved, that fact needs to be communicated immediately as approved information back to those dealing with inquiries and to the production team responsible for updates on the website and included in the next round of information updates to be distributed to the various audiences.

This fact-by-fact approval process should replace the time consuming and burdensome process that currently exists in many JICs. A press release is drafted and approved by the JIC staff and PIO, then submitted to Incident Command with each member of the Unified Command reviewing it line by line. It is not uncommon to have the differences of opinion about word choice take up to an hour or more while the basic facts have all been agreed on. Ironically, in that hour of word-smithing, the facts are likely to have changed and the press release they are editing is no longer relevant.

Increased Autonomy

In a large-scale response a great many decisions have to be made by responders at all levels of the response. Operations and Planning Section Chiefs have to have in place people they can trust to make the right decisions when needed and to refer to those above them when appropriate. This is a normal and expected part of running an effective response. Incident Commanders demonstrate far too frequently that while they trust those within the operational response to make appropriate decisions, that trust does not extend to the Joint Information Center function. But as a response will be hampered significantly with too little delegation of authority, so will the communication about the response.

Well-founded trust combined with clear policies is the only solution. As Incident Command must be able to trust the PIO and his or her decisions, the PIO must also be able to trust the JIC staff. This is challenging given the very nature of a JIC which is most frequently an ad hoc group of Public Information Officers from many different organizations. The ideal solution is to be able to work together before a major event in drills or exercises. Since that is not always possible, the Incident Commanders and PIOs need to have a way of coming to terms with the basic policies and plans regarding communication very early in the response. A brief policy and plan document that describes planned operation of the PIO function and the JIC may go a long way to building trust and enabling coordinated and effective decision-making. As the scope of responsibility is much broader for the Incident Commanders, it would typically fall to the PIO to have such a document available and to briefly discuss this with IC/UC as early in the response as possible.

Continuous Web Updates

It is now commonplace for a major response to have its own response website managed by the JIC. There are still circumstances where state agencies demand running their own websites independent of the JIC, using their authority over Responsible Parties to enforce their demands. This is a violation of the National Incident Management System and should be disallowed, if necessary, by the Federal On Scene Commander who has the highest authority.

The Joint Information Center website should be the authoritative source for information about the response, but, as pointed out earlier, it can only be if it is kept up-to-date. In the social media world that means a constant flow of information updates. If the technology used or the JIC processes used cannot insure that new facts go from discovered to approved to published on the website in less than fifteen minutes, an inadvertent decision has been made to render the JIC irrelevant.

One objection to this continuous updating is that new information may not be available, that there is nothing worthy of a “release.” While there may be nothing significant enough for a full release, it is likely that there are even minor changes or information updates that can be provided. It has been clearly demonstrated that once audiences—reporters or stakeholders—get accustomed to a steady flow of information, they get frustrated very quickly if that flow is interrupted without explanation. If there is nothing new to report, it is much better to provide even that information rather than remain

silent. As the incident winds down and the information about it changes less often, new expectations about information updates can be set. Instead of fifteen minute intervals or one hour intervals the updates can be reduced to a couple of times a day, to once a day to even once a week in the later stages of a major incident (see item below on “Extending the Life of the JIC”).

Those PIOs who have used Twitter as a means of updating audiences on fast moving events have clearly demonstrated the value and popularity of this continuous flow. The issue of using Twitter or other instant information technologies is how do they fit in with the JIC, particularly if a website has been established as the only official information source about the event. This will be discussed in the section below on appropriate social media use.

Full Spectrum Monitoring

It has always been one of the key functions of the JIC to monitor the media. The JIC is the ears of the response as well as the mouth. Monitoring includes the media as well as other key external audiences such as elected officials, community members, etc. The job now is much more complex than it used to be. It is not sufficient to have someone in the JIC tasked with buying newspapers from the local newsstand and bringing them in the JIC and installing a television with cable or satellite in the JIC. Full spectrum monitoring includes instant monitoring of all forms of media including print, online, blogs, cable, broadcast and social media sites. The ability to monitor and receive alerts on relevant online activity in real time or near real time is now essential. In some respects this can make the job of monitoring external stakeholders easier because they too participate in online conversations.

As it has become far more common for communication operations of larger companies and organizations to have full spectrum monitoring and clipping, it is now essential to have that capability within the JIC. PIER, the leading Joint Information Center management solution, includes full spectrum monitoring including print, online, blogs, and video (cable and broadcast). In addition, it provides survey creation tools that enable JIC members to quickly create, publish, distribute information-gathering surveys to aid in external stakeholder monitoring.

While media and online monitoring is critical, other elements of the JIC provide a monitoring function as well. It is common that information coming from interviews with

reporters or conversations with stakeholders reveals information vital to the response. This information, verified or not, needs to be provided by JIC staff to the Situation Status department of the Planning Section immediately. For JIC's using PIER as their communication management platform, it is common that most information relevant to the response comes in through the Inquiry Management function. In Hurricane Katrina, for example, Public Affairs leaders in Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington DC were able to quickly identify that the issue of the rescue of pets was an important emerging issue based on the volume and nature of the inquiries flowing through the Coast Guard's Hurricane Katrina-specific website. Policy statements were quickly developed and the dispersed Public Affairs Officers were provided with the appropriate statements to respond to those continuing to inquire. Experience has shown that once an issue, rumor or misinformation is identified through the Inquiry Management function, it can be managed by proactively addressing it the next information releases distributed and published on the website.

Ideally the transfer of information from the JIC to the response team is facilitated by the communication platforms used. For the response leadership, it means that JIC staff must have input capabilities into response management technologies such as WebEOC or E-Team. When those kinds of systems are integrated with PIER, that kind of instant relay of information is made possible within the current workflow maximizing the efficiency of the JIC staff while enabling the response leadership to manage response resources based on best possible information.

Social media must also be monitored. While standard tools such as Google Alerts can be very useful, and effective monitoring tools such as provided by PIER can pick up blog traffic and mentions on other websites, there is no one single answer to effective social media monitoring. Twitter posts, known as "tweets" can be picked up using tools such as www.twitscoop.com, particularly when those using Twitter make use of hashtags (<http://twitter.pbwiki.com/Hashtags>) for identifying content. Sites that aggregate tweets for news purposes are also available such as BreakingNewsOn (www.twitter.com/breakingnewson). Sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace are by their nature private, allowing only those identified as "friends" and approved by the site owner to participate. Content on these sites is not going to register on search engines. However, requests to be registered on known sites can be submitted and if approved, the opportunity to listen in and participate is available. Other popular discussion sites such as digg (www.digg.com) and newsvine (www.newsvine.com) are open to view and search.

Use Appropriate Social Media, Appropriately

While social media must be monitored, the decision to use social media technologies to aid in information flow is a little more complex. While opportunities such as Twitter and YouTube can aid in the fast and efficient flow of relevant information, NIMS compliance means that these forms must be subject to the information discipline of the JIC and therefore of Incident Commander approval.

The best way to insure compliance is to subject use of these tools to the same information approval processes as any other information. Using JIC communication management technology such as PIER simplifies that because Twitter or YouTube simply becomes one more distribution option. For example, with PIER a folder is created called "Twitter" and documents or information releases are prepared in the same way as any other information release and can only be distributed when approved by an authorized approver. Any updates of information via the incident website or by email, text message or text-to-voice phone can include a Twitter feed via PIER.

If PIER is not used, or a PIO or authorized JIC staff chooses, the tweets can be submitted directly to a twitter account set up for the JIC through a cell phone text message or through email. The control is based on who has access to that twitter account. Unlike when distributed through PIER, there is no record or logging of these submissions which means that a separate ICS214 log must be maintained specifically for these posts.

If Twitter, YouTube or other social media outlets are used, it is important to understand their limitations and intent. Twitter, for example, is a text message so limited to typically no more than 140 characters. This is the limitation imposed by some cell carriers. So Twitter is best used for immediate, critical updates, always linking the "followers" back to the JIC website. Similarly, YouTube, Facebook or other websites that may be linked in to the JIC need to direct viewers back to the JIC website. It and it alone needs to be seen as the only authoritative voice for the response. To allow other websites or social media outlets to perform those functions would be to violate the "single voice" intent of the Incident Command System and therefore not comply with the National Incident Management System.

Extend the Life of the JIC

Common thinking about JIC operations is that they start and conclude with major media attention. This is simply no longer the case. The old picture is based on the idea that once the media turns its attention to other topics, the interest in the event and response disappears. That was never completely true, but is much less true today. Those most impacted by an event continue to have a high level of interest in the response activities and longer term recovery activities long after the media has turned its attention elsewhere. In fact, the media attention span has become considerably shorter in large part due to the internet itself. Their role is not to provide complete and comprehensive coverage of events as it is to alert its audience to the fact that activities are happening right now. Audiences then frequently go directly to the sources of the information, mostly to company or response websites, to news sites with a greater focus on the event, and on blogs or news commentary sites where the discussion goes on.

Traffic on numerous crisis and emergency response JIC sites over the past few years have demonstrated a “long tail” of continuing interest. One organization turned off its website despite the fact that it was receiving 20,000 visits per day because the news media was no longer carrying news of the event. However, those 20,000 visitors were seeking additional information and providing the responders with the opportunity to speak to them directly and not through the media. This is an opportunity that should not be ignored if building trust is the key concern.

Social media, when understood as a conversation or numerous conversations, results in higher demand for on-going communication. In the aftermath of a major natural disaster, the event and the effectiveness of those involved in the response will be a topic of conversation for a considerable period of time. It is important to continue to monitor these conversations, to respond to rumors and misinformation, to answer specific questions and reinforce key messages—all important functions of the JIC. While the level of activity will greatly decrease after the major media have moved on, the thousands who continue to have an interest will continue to seek information and engage in online conversations. JIC staff can clearly be reduced significantly and if the decision is made to dismantle the JIC entirely it is important to transition the diminished but still significant communication activities to an appropriate agency.



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