Under the radar: exploiting “new school” media to capture unreported avalanche incidents

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Unless you’re a sheriff or coroner, it’s not easy getting details on avalanche incidents. Many success stories go unreported, skewing publicly available statistics toward fatalities and worst-case scenarios. The growing social media environment, however, provides instant access to those who have been on the ground in avalanche incidents, whether or not these incidents were reported. This can provide valuable insights into what’s really happening on the debris pile: techniques and gear that are working and not working, human factors in avalanche rescues, and what the real-life challenges are in “live combat.”

Through North American social media, including internet forums, blogs, and Facebook pages, we gathered information from 97 respondents that have been in avalanche rescues—in many cases, live recoveries. Our key findings: 1) almost 40 percent of the companion rescue incidents went unreported; 2) over 25 respondents had performed live recoveries with avalanche beacons—almost a third of which went unreported; and 3) shoveling and evacuation were the most time-consuming phases of most incidents.