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## Improving Community Relations through
## Law Enforcement's Use of Social Media

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## By
## Adam J. Phillips

## Greenville Police Department
## Greenville, Texas
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# ABSTRACT

The concept of a law enforcement agency using social media is no longer a concept; it is a reality. However, there is a possibility that not all law enforcement agencies are taking advantage of the opportunity to communicate efficiently with their community. This is why social media platforms should be implemented and used by all law enforcement agencies to engage the community and positively affect community relations.

A police department's ability to communicate effectively with their community could be a key component in affecting that relationship in a positive manner. Major ideas both for and against this concept will be identified. These include how communication is vital in establishing and maintaining an efficient relationship between the public and a law enforcement agency. Another way departments can positively affect community relations is by controlling what information should be released, such as the content of a press release. However, to counter these positions, one could argue that having more knowledge could create a fear within that community. It also could be difficult to interact with people through Facebook if the personnel who operate it within the police department are not properly trained. Thus, allowing the public to understand how a police department is combating crimes presented through Facebook could lead to a reduction in fear (Lieberman, Koetzle & Sakiyama, 2013; Moore & Trojanowicz, 1988; Warr, 2000). What everyone could see through a department's use of social media is an increased desire from the public and law enforcement to create a better relationship that could be seen as broken.

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# INTRODUCTION

An argument can be made that the largest community in the world now resides in social media. Society has been provided the opportunity to voice opinions and concerns on various topics through a centralized location known as social media. As a part of society, law enforcement agencies need to be able to capitalize on the opportunity social media provides to communicate with the community.

Community policing is about police officers building a relationship with the community so the needs of the community can be addressed. Police should to be able to reach the community using the most efficient way possible. Nowadays, community members are not outside, but on cellular phones. This is most evident by the increasing participation in social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In fact, Facebook alone has over 1.78 billion users who remain active on a monthly basis (Richter, 2016). Police have the opportunity to provide community policing to a portion of this large audience.

Many years ago, community policing was about reducing crime and acknowledging the fear of crime in the community through foot patrols and storefronts. In other words, police were out walking in the community and talking with people in hopes to form personal relationships. It has gone from personal contacts being the only way to communicate to using the avenue of social media. In general, people only come into contact with police when they are the victim of a crime or in other times of crisis. Therefore, police agencies should constantly find new ways to communicate with people.

People's ability to interact with each other has changed throughout the years. The rapidly changing way society communicates could be attributed to the way technology is advancing over time. What once was a joke about the computer technology bought today becoming out of date by tomorrow has now become a reality. Thus, police should be able to progress and become more efficient just as technology has done throughout the years.

Police are no longer able to form relationships efficiently through the old way of community policing. Although communication itself has not changed, the way in which people communicate has changed. A study in February of 2017 showed people ages 16 to 24 spend over three hours per day on their mobile devices ("Reach of leading," 2017). Police should use this opportunity to capture the community's attention and develop a better relationship with the public. Therefore, social media platforms should be implemented and used by all law enforcement agencies to engage the community and positively affect community relations.

## POSITION

Communication with the public is a vital part of a police department establishing and maintaining a quality relationship with the community. The way in which society communicates has changed many times over the years. Communication has evolved from the use of smoke signals by Native Americans in the early years of this country to the invention of the telephone. Now in the 21$^{st}$ century, technology is rapidly increasing, which has accelerated how information is communicated from one person to another. This can be seen through the world's use of social media.

Through a snapshot of the world's total population, which as of January 2016 is estimated at 7.4 billion, it was discovered that over 2.3 billion people are active social media users (Chaffey, 2016). Not only do many users worldwide use social media, but the majority of social media users receive news information on social media platforms. A study by Gottfried & Shearer (2016) showed 62% of United States adults get their news on social media. A similar study was also conducted in 2012, which showed 49% of United States adults reported seeing news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). In four years, the people who receive their news through social media has risen 13% and should continue to rise in the coming years (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Therefore, police departments need to improve their communication with the public by engaging people through social media, which can help positively shape public perception.

Another use of social media police departments have the opportunity to take advantage of is to engage the public in discussions over various topics. Although the public may not currently view police work as a service which society believes is important, the public may still develop a different perception if police can properly communicate with society. The hope is that these topics, such as the services the public needs law enforcement to provide the most, will help both the police and the community better understand each other. Thus, by helping the community better understand law enforcement, the opportunity could exist to reduce negative contacts between the police and the public.

Negative contacts seen through news media between police and the public destroys public perception, while the assumption is that contacts seen of police

providing good service can create a positive perception (Bain, Robinson, & Conser, 2014, p. 269). Social media gives police departments the ability to engage different groups of people with different backgrounds at a centralized location. These platforms appear to be a prime opportunity to help influence the public's view toward police and their community.

When delving deeper into social media, there are two social media platforms that need to be implemented by law enforcement; Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter are currently two of the most commonly used social media sites used by United States police agencies (IACP, 2011). Facebook and Twitter can be used to issue press releases from a police department. Using the department's Facebook page can also solve crimes by soliciting help from the community. Facebook can then be used to show a department's effectiveness on investigating and solving those crimes. This creates an environment of community engagement and the absorption of information that could help calm fears. Showing a photo of a police officer with a newborn child on Twitter or Facebook can also convey to the public the human side of policing, which can be assumed to be positive. All of these applications of social media platforms can help put a police department in a positive light with the community. More importantly, it allows law enforcement to effectively communicate with the public, which is a fundamental part of community policing.

This form of communication should also be done if the assumption is that most people no longer show up to city council meetings or town hall meetings when they can find the information on social media. Social media not only provides the avenue for which information is obtained but it also provides instant access to that information.

Access that would not have been available until the evening news or even until a person reads it in tomorrow's morning newspaper is now available at a person's fingertips.

A second way police departments can improve relations with communities is by releasing the content they want released, and thus controlling the message sent to the public. Agencies no longer need to be concerned with disseminating information through traditional methods. Although traditional methods should still be used, the focus of the dissemination of information needs to be shifted towards social media. Someone in society, most likely through the news media, could be the one controlling a police department's message if a police department is ineffective in communicating with their community (Strandberg, 2015). People tend to say the media is able to influence society from stories conveyed on a daily basis through television, social media, or print. Reporters and journalists have long been able to dictate feelings of sorrow, happiness, anger, and resentment by choosing what stories to report. This leads to law enforcement complaining about how the media twists or slants a story involving police officers and in turn, can negatively shape the public perception of law enforcement.

Police departments are in a prime position to be able to provide and control the information released to the public through social media. This is also true for a police department trying to manage a department's message to the public. If the police department's presence has been established in the community, then the method the stories are delivered should be through social media. People who have received a vast array of information about police activities in their area are likely to have a greater level of confidence in how police are curtailing crime (Copitch & Fox, 2010; Duffy et al., 2008). Therefore, police should release information and stories in a location where the

media will not be able to manipulate the facts. One of the most logical ways to communicate this information is through the use of social media. Thus, by controlling the information released, law enforcement should be able to positively affect community relations and help change public perception.

## COUNTER POSITION

Although social media can have a positive effect on public perception of law enforcement, it may also create a new fear within the community. This fear comes from the public becoming more aware of the details of what is going on in their city. The more information a person has about crime could create a paranoia that they will become a victim of a crime.

Fear of crime, if used properly, will not have negative results for citizens as long as the risk of crime is diminished by local law enforcement (Lieberman, Koetzle, & Sakiyama, 2013; Moore & Trojanowicz, 1988; Warr, 2000). Users of social media could become more isolated from simply using social media platforms. This could become an even greater problem if social media users allow fears and paranoias of crimes to become realities.

Although fear of crime could become a great fear of social media users, one could say that an influx of information through social media helps to calm public fears. According to the United States Department of Justice, a plan to address fears of the community can be established if that fear has been identified (Cordner, 2010). Thus, by providing the information about how police can fight crime will help ease the minds of the concerned public.

Additionally, police departments can use their social media outlets to provide success stories to the public. The perception from the community could potentially change from a concern to a relief that crimes are being solved. If crimes are solved and displayed to the community, then the community's trust in police could also be increased. Increasing the community's trust ultimately could lead to a better relationship between the community and the police.

Another argument that could be made about law enforcement focusing on improving community relations through social media is that social media is dependent upon gaining followers and the interaction of those followers. Through common knowledge, followers are people in the community who actively watch an organization's social media platform. In fact, there is a chance the followers that police departments are able to reach do not even live in their community. Facebook, for example, uses a complicated algorithm to disperse information. On the other side, Facebook also uses a similar algorithm to control users' news feed, which basically learns what information users look at most frequently and hides the other stories irrelevant to a user. What makes it even more difficult is how Facebook hides their algorithms and little is known about how they operate.

However, social media program managers learning how to manipulate this algorithm can have long reaching effects in the Facebook world. Thus properly trained individuals within a law enforcement agency could help counteract the difficulty of gaining followers. Even though the news feed algorithm shapes what people look at, the content used could help spread that story at a more rapid pace. It is thought that whenever a post is made on Facebook, only a very small portion of the followers

actually see the post.  An anecdotal theory to this algorithm is that for each like, comment, or share a story receives the more "points" are added to the algorithm.  Thus, the algorithm is supposed to expand the viewership of that post, which allows an opportunity for more people to see the story and follow the department.

Another simple action the manager of a department's Facebook page can perform is by "liking" each post they make and every comment that is posted to a story. This action is believed to add to the algorithm and thus continue to allow more to view the department's post.  How Facebook's algorithm for news feeds actually works is a well-kept secret, but there is no doubt that it shapes what a user sees on a daily basis (Oremus, 2016).  It is suggested that if a police department can drive content through social media, then a police department can gain followers.  Therefore, by providing social media training to department's social media personnel can allow department's to have opportunities to not only reach more people, but the people in their community.

## RECOMMENDATION

Social media can contribute greatly in helping to create more positive relationships between the public and law enforcement by controlling the type of information distributed (Lieberman et al., 2013, p. 441).  Law enforcement agencies implementation of social media should lead to a positive effect on their relationship community.  The relationship between a law enforcement agency and the community should improve by more content being seen by the public through social media. Furthermore, the constant interaction a social media outlet provides instant communication from a user to a police department and vice versa.  This interaction with

the community will resonate with citizens and improve relations by the result of better communication between police officers and the community in which they serve.

Another way social media should improve community relations is by controlling the information that is released. The news media will release a story that may have missing information that sheds a negative light on law enforcement. In turn, police agencies can release stories about police with more complete information that will allow the public to view all of the facts and form a more objective opinion.

Some may contend that the more information a person receives, the greater the fear could become in a user's mind. However, research shows that knowing what crime is occurring in their community can give the public an understanding of how the police will combat that crime (Lieberman et al., 2013, p. 440; Moore & Trojanowicz, 1988; Warr, 2000). This goes hand in hand with a police department's ability to control that message through social media while limiting the news media from sending out their message.

Not only can a law enforcement agency control a message to the public, but it can also be used in developing a high level of trust with the community. The trust comes from a police department using social media to be more transparent to their community. The more trust a police department has with the community, the better the communication. Therefore, the high level of communication morphs into a better relationship between people and officers.

There are some people out there who believe a problem with social media is that it is dependent on users following an agency's page and interacting with the stories posted to it. Although this argument could have some validity to it, with the proper

training through a social media course, agencies will be able to combat these concerns by growing the followers on their social media platforms. Social media training will be able to provide tips on how to gain followers and how to get those followers to interact with posts. Not only will additional users flock to social media to see stories, but they will also interact with departments through private messages. These messages could provide valuable information such as evidence to crimes being investigated, crimes in progress, and even advice on what content the community wants to see and what they do not want to see.

The great news is there are not many steps needed to begin the process for a law enforcement agency establishing a foot print in the social media world. Once the leadership establishes they want to venture into social media, the first step is choosing a social media program manager. This manager's responsibility will to be establishing the agency's platforms, such as Facebook and/or Twitter. This person will also be held accountable for all content posted to a social media outlet through an official law enforcement agency's page. The next step to implement this process will be to find the manager a training course. The training course must have an instructor who can teach the manager the parameters of how a social media platform works, what content they should post, and when to post that content.

The best part of beginning a social media page on Facebook, for example, can be done for free. The word "free" is always an attention grabber for police department's leaders. Even though Facebook or Twitter may be free, the only true cost of a social media program will be the training a manager receives and the time it takes that employee to run the sites efficiently. Although it would require some training, the cost

would still be minimal compared to having police officers patrolling neighborhoods on foot or still having to maintain a store front property in their jurisdiction. The use of social media will assist police in being able to keep up with the age we live in, which is the rapidly changing age of technology. If law enforcement agencies will implement a social media program, their relationships with citizens in their community should grow at a healthy pace.

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