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Public Information Officers and Media Relations

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ABSTRACT

The public and the media have an increased interest in the information and occurrences in their communities. The need to acquire information from police departments has increased because of police shootings and terroristic incidents that have begun to occur more frequently. The media is on the scene and are inquiring about the circumstances surrounding the incidents as on duty police officers are trying to stop threats, contain, and investigate crime scenes. One particular incident was the Orlando nightclub shooting, which had citizens in that community seeking answers to multiple questions concerning the incident (Ellis, Fantz, Karimi, & McLaughlin, 2016). Thus, incidents like this made the need for Public Information Officers (PIOs) more prevalent to answer questions on crime scenes that the public and news media want answered. Therefore, police departments should train at least two public information officers (PIOs) to interact positively with the media during major incidents.

The training for the PIOs and the legal considerations of the information that can be provided should be addressed and then implemented once a policy and protocol have been put into place. All information that is acquired by police agencies should be vetted and the information that can be released should be given out in order to update the media and the public on major incidents. The head of the agency, such as the police chief should relay information to the media but the PIO should be the second point of contact and in many cases the main point. Consequently, police agencies should have a proactive communication strategy with the media so that information is not misconstrued between the two entities. The police agency controls the information that is being provided so protocols, policies and procedures should be implemented.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the need for information by the public and the media has grown exponentially. With the increasing interaction that the public has with the police; which has been good or bad, there is a growing need to know what is occurring with the police and citizens. Many minority confrontations have ended in police related shootings, which have sparked several groups to emerge from these incidents. Groups like Black Lives Matter (BLM), White Lives Matter (WLM), and Police Lives Matter (PLM) have all developed from officer involved shootings, police ambushes, and other tragic events.

The media is on the scene and are asking questions about what led up to the event. In the past, police departments placed the media out of range from the scene and talked to them when they believed that they needed to. When the police agencies did speak to the media, many did not know what to say or know how to respond to an aggressive reporter's barrage of questions. Not only were media representatives on the ground at crime scenes, they would call police departments in order to acquire information and request to speak to whomever they could to acquire that information. This is where public information officers (PIOs) started to come into use. PIOs, as they are known, were sent to crime scenes to answer questions that were directed to police personnel who were investigating the incidents that occurred.

Therefore, police, sheriff, and fire departments need PIOs to be trained to deal with media representatives in order to provide information to the media and the public. This research was done in order to show that PIOs are needed and should be trained to answer questions that the media or the public may have in reference to major incidents

in their community. Therefore, police departments should train at least two public information officers to interact positively with the media during major incidents.

POSITION

The legal considerations that public information officers have to contend with are the legality of the information provided, the amount of information given out, and the information that the media should be provided. Also, information requested by the media or the public may hinder an investigation and hamper the efforts of police agencies attempting to solve crimes if too much information is released. Therefore, police organizations should train at least two public information officers to have knowledge and training in public information. Moreover, they need to have this knowledge in order to answer questions that the media and the public request. This way the information released would not interfere with police investigations.

The police chief, sheriff, and fire chief should have enough knowledge and training to interact with the media and the public, as well as a secondary officer. The Texas Open Records Act was enacted in 1973 in reference to misuse of information. The act was codified into the Texas Government Code under Section 552.221, which specifies “the officer for public information must protect public information and promptly make it available to the public for copying or inspecting” (Public Information Handbook, 2016 p. 20). Moreover, the duty of PIOs is to make public information accessible to the public upon their request without hesitation. Furthermore, “an officer for public information shall provide the public information for inspection or duplication in the offices of the governmental body to comply with the law” (Public Information Handbook, 2016 p.20).

The provisions specify what information can be given when the public requests information that police agencies have in writing. When major incidents occur, police agencies have to record and relay information as it pertains to saving lives and halting the destruction of property. When the media arrives on scene, they have the right to information. Police agencies should have their PIO available on the scene to answer any questions that the media has requested. The public information aspect deals with the public's access to information, but it does not give the public the right to access information that is not public in nature (Public Information Handbook, 2016).

The dissemination of information to the media and the public has become a growing concern for police departments. As more and more major events have occurred, the public has become increasingly curious about what is transpiring in their communities. The media has arrived to fulfill the need of relaying information to the public via television, the Internet, and social media. Police agencies should be proactive in their efforts to provide information to the media and have a designated PIO to answer questions and relay other information as needed. Although there are laws for providing information to the public, police agencies need to enact policies and strategies to outline how this will be conducted. Moreover, the Texas Government Code specifies, "public information that is written, produced, collected, assembled or in the course of official business the governmental body uses funds to maintain the information, it is deemed to be public information" (Public Information Handbook, 2016 p. 2).

However, the lack of not providing information to the public when something occurs has the public on edge and builds mistrust for police agencies in their communities. It is impossible to build trust when police agencies are not transparent

when major incidents occur in their jurisdictions. Police agencies need to be aware that all information cannot be provided and should be ambiguous to limit panic or hostilities that may result from the information that the public acquires. Information that PIOs have should be placed into three categories, such as information that is known that can be disseminated, information not known at the time, and information that is known but is withheld and the public is told why it can not be given out (Strandberg, 2014).

Media personnel are becoming more vigilant and resourceful in acquiring information for their news organizations. Moreover, they acquire information from other news outlets or from print, television, and radio (Davis, 2010). Thus, through this process media personnel are providing the public the story without having to speak with anyone to acquire the relevant facts on the situation.

Police agencies should try to be on the forefront of relaying information to the media and public so that incidents do not escalate. A good example of an incident that occurred was the Orlando nightclub shooting (Ellis, Fantz, Karimi, & McLaughlin, 2016). In this incident, there was mass confusion and information was being relayed out to the media as it was acquired. The media relayed the information to the public as it was given to them. Therefore, a secondary PIO should always be on hand for backup so that there is another person to respond to questions and to represent the police department (Moore, 2007). The primary PIO should be the department head, which is who the media and public are waiting to hear from. There are several occasions when the agency head becomes dependent on the PIO and does not speak during critical incidents. Thus, when issues like club shootings occur, confidence, trust, and support for the police agency begin to erode (Grogan, 2011). So the premise for PIOs is always

to have a good relationship with the media and use effective communication tactics so that public relations do not have negative consequences. Since news and information can be acquired from multiple sources, it is paramount that PIOs be open and use technology as tools in this new age of information sharing.

When media outlets send investigative reporters to major scenes, they are looking to acquire certain angles on what police have done to investigate the incident. PIOs should be aware that anytime a major incident occurs, they should have as much information as possible. They should have a written protocol and should have a nice, calm, informative demeanor that should deescalate the interview, which would allow for more information to be relayed (Donlon-Cotton, 2007).

After incidents occur and police personnel are on the scene, the media should be staged in a media staging area so that the PIO or backup can relay the information to them at once. This way, the PIO only needs to give information at one time, which includes updates as they become known. The PIO is the most important aspect between the media and the way that the police organization may be perceived. Moreover, the best way for PIOs to represent their departments effectively and efficiently is enhanced training in relation to understanding social media, incorporating policies and protocols, and sustained attention to the facts of the incident (Miller, 2012).

PIO personnel have various job responsibilities. Not only do they have to respond to scenes of major incidents but they also have to monitor social media on the Internet. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has been instrumental in providing federal, state, and local government with an incident command system (ICS) to react to major incident. In a 2009 survey of random adults the Red Cross found

that people turn to social media for information. The statistical information that was acquired was that 44% of people would ask others in their social networks to contact authorities, 35% just posted an inquiry for assistance on the agency's Facebook page, 28% replied that they sent Twitter messages to the authorities, 69% said that emergency responders should monitor social media sites for a faster response, 50% believe agencies are already responding to social calls for assistance, and 74% presumed that help would come in less than an hour after their social media post (Miller, 2011, p. 10).

The PIO is only one-half of the issue when it comes to knowing how to interact with the media. The administration of the police agencies should also have some level of knowledge on how to deal with the media. During the 2014 annual National Information Officers Association (NIOA) Conference, two points were noted to do before a crisis, develop a working relationship with the media and develop a relationship with your area PIOs. The agency PIO may not be the only PIO in action at a scene if it is being handled across several different agencies. There maybe a need to have another agency PIO speak on behalf of a multi-agency event. Therefore, area police chiefs and assistant police chiefs should reach out and meet with other PIOs in their immediate areas. Thus, for the reasons stated above police departments should train at least two public information officers to interact positively with the media during major incidents.

COUNTER POSITION

Some police personnel believe that the media will distort the information that they are provided with and twist it to make their news segments more interesting for their ratings. One reason that police personnel believe this to be true is because of all the

newscasts they observe where the media relays information to the public that is merely their opinion and has nothing to do with the facts that are given to them. Moreover, the news media is more advanced and they want stories quickly from public safety agencies and they are being requested by their companies to make the stories better in the process (Mateck, 2016). Thus, for this reason, police agencies give ambiguous information so that there is no room to distort the facts surrounding the incident. Therefore, ambiguous information is provided to the media at first so that they can be updated as newer information is acquired.

Police departments trust that the reporters that acquire the information for their newscasts will relay them in a truthful and unbiased manner. Therefore, communication with the media should be the main job of PIOs and it is essential (Mateck, 2016). Agency's should have a proactive communication strategy with the media in order to halt any misconstrued information or fact that may exist between the two entities. The involved police agency should understand that they control the information that will be provided to the media. The policies and procedures that police agencies have written in reference to the media and public relations should be adhered to and it should be in line with the laws specified under the Texas Open Records Act, along with the Government Code (Sewell, 2007).

Many police departments do not have enough personnel to place a full time PIO into a public relations position, therefore the position is seen as a luxury. The responsibilities are usually given to multiple officers when the need arises (Hsiung, 2016). Some police agencies take this stance because of limited staffing and budget constraints. Therefore, police agencies need to have a public information officer who

can communicate with the media via different social media platforms. Public information officers need to have support from the top down and also from the bottom up, which can help to resonate transparency and trust in the agency.

Although police agencies have issues with limited resources and funds media relations with the public is paramount to instill trust in the agency. The law specifies that the top elected or appointed officials of governmental bodies shall attend training in public information or designate a public information coordinator (Public Information Handbook, 2016). The fact that the law specifically states that these officials “shall” attend training sums up the need for them to know what information they should relay and what information that they should not give to the media. Also, in order to have a contingency plan in place, there should be at least two PIOs. One PIO should be the police chief, sheriff or fire chief and the other PIO should be someone that can represent the department well and understands the policies, procedures, and laws pertaining to information. The PIO’s position is one that has a far-reaching impact if the information is not given in a timely manner and if it is too vague. The PIO’s role is paramount to how police agencies are perceived by the public, and the public usually sees police departments through the newscasts, the Internet, newspapers, and various other social media. For this reason, police departments should train at least two public information officers to interact positively with the media during major incidents.

RECOMMENDATION

Police agencies need to train public information officers to interact with the media and the public in reference to relaying information during major disasters and catastrophic events. Moreover, police agency command staffs, as well as uniformed

officers need to support the social media efforts of the PIOs, which will enhance the agency's professional appearance in the community (Hsiung, 2016). Effective policies and procedures should be developed and the public information officer should have a good grasp on the information that they disseminate or withhold from the media and the general public. The public relies on police departments to provide them with police protection and also keep them aware of any issues that may place them in harms way. Therefore, positive interactions with the media can translate to reporters showing police agencies in a positive light. The PIOs role is not only to interact with the media, but they should also interact with the community through other forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The media and the public are using various types of social media to communicate and stay up to date on news in their communities and around the world. Moreover, the news media is under pressure to provide the public with information on issues that occur in their communities, so the public looks to social media outlets to provide updated information (Mateck, 2016). Similarly, police agencies should try to emulate the efforts of news media outlets and push information out to the media and the public to get ahead of misinformation that could possibly occur. Therefore, police departments need to keep up with how information is being shared and disseminated and acquire information in the same manner. Also, they need to place information on as many social media outlets as possible, because this is how most of the community receives their information.

PIO's are placed into the field to facilitate positive public relations with the media and the general public. Police agencies, sheriff departments, and fire departments can acquire a great deal of support from the community if PIOs are utilized in a proactive

manner. If PIO's are trained effectively to know what to say and what information that can be released if a serious event occurs in their communities can make them more relatable to the public. Public safety departments should have a good working relationship with media outlets in their areas so that when incidents or events occur they can relay information that will keep the public updated so that there is no confusion and information is not received wrong. Public safety departments should have personnel who know how to access social media and put information out to the public, which brings them, up to date on the issues in the area. More consideration should be placed on the future of public relations and information dissemination. PIOs from different jurisdictions should communicate with each other in case a major incident requires the help of other specially trained information officers. Thus, if a major incident occurs a neighboring PIO can monitor multiple social media sites so that the wrong information does not become the public's non-fact based information (Mateck, 2016). By positively developing policies, procedures, and guidelines for effective public relations, PIOs can be a positive tool to instill trust, support, and backing from the community in which their agencies serve.

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