

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**The Ethical Use of Social Media**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The medium of social media represents a paradigm shift for how police departments interact with the public. Citizens expect service from their public organizations including the unbiased delivery of public information. Law enforcement agencies can build credibility with the citizens by being transparent and providing the information that citizens want and need to make informed decisions. In order to ensure that organizations are acting in the best interest of the public, organizations should reframe how they are treating social media. Public organizations have a long history of utilizing various forms of public relations, and much academic study exists in regard to the ethics of public relations. When reframed in this context, the ethical use of social media becomes a relevant issue. This paper argues that law enforcement agencies should adopt policies that determine how they will use social media. The aim of these policies is to ensure that agencies act ethically. The possibility of increased fear of crime as a result of more information is addressed as a counter position. This paper argues that while the fear of crime is a valid concern it does not outweigh an ethical responsibility to provide accurate information to the public. Social media is a novel platform due to its ability to facilitate two way communication between public organizations and citizens. Social media allows departments to share information on a scale that was previously impossible. Departments routinely use social media to build community support. The use of social media to build narratives is addressed in this paper as a counter position. While such tactics are no doubt effective, this paper argues that these methods should not be the primary purpose of social media and should be carefully balanced with other forms of information.

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media has overtaken traditional media sources as the primary information outlet for police departments to share information with the public. Research by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) (2014) determined that “95.9 % of agencies surveyed use social media in some capacity...[and] 55.9% of agencies not currently using social media are considering its adoption” (para. 3). Departments have found that through social media they have the ability to provide information that would never be covered by local media. Law enforcement agencies have moved into the domain of social media with a variety of intents, but little consideration has been given to the ethical responsibility of public organizations when communicating through social media.

Most departments that use social media only have policies concerning their employees' use of social media, but do not have policies established regarding the use of social media as a public organization. Researchers have noted “as the popularity of social media soars, the importance that governments place on social media as a communication tool to engage citizens must rise in turn and reflect active dialog with citizens as a priority” (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010, p. 1612). Although social media represents a new means of communication, it should be seen through the historic lens of government public relations. Viewing social media in this light allows one to apply ethical frameworks from the field of public relations to social media. The field of ethics is concerned with defining right and wrong behaviors. Law enforcement agencies pride themselves in following ethical codes and are structured around policies and

procedures. With the growing importance of social media, now is the time for law enforcement agencies to consider what ethics are to be followed in a digital space.

Public sector ethics can be defined as “a set of principles that guide public officials in their service to their constituents, including their decision-making on behalf of their constituents” (“Public sector,” n.d., para. 1). One decision that law enforcement officials must make is what information their constituents are entitled to receive. The objective of this paper is to convince the reader that law enforcement agencies, as public organizations, should view social media as a form of public relations and follow ethical guidelines for the dissemination of information. The argument being put forward is based on four premises. The first premise is that social media is the most effective communications tool for police departments (public organizations) to use to communicate with the public. With this being the case, the second premise is that the management of the information that is communicated to the public, through social media, is a form of public relations. The third premise is that when organizations have no policy regarding the use of social media to distribute certain information (intentionally or unintentionally), forms of media bias occur. The fourth premise is that if public organizations are to be credible and accountable they have a duty to provide the public unbiased information. The conclusion that follows from the four premises above is that public organizations should enact policies that establish ethical guidelines for their use of social media based on the recognition that social media is a form of public relations.

## **POSITION**

Due to the widespread use of social media in the public sector, departments should treat the dissemination of information to the public through this means as a

public relations process. The Public Relations Society of America defines public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2012, para. 3). Because public organizations are ultimately accountable to the public, special consideration should be given to what information is being shared. Hutton (1999) highlights six “relatively distinct orientations or models of public relations practice: persuasion, advocacy, public information, cause-related public relations, image/reputation management, and relationship management” (p. 205). Each of the practices identified by Hutton (1999) can be found being effectively implemented on social media accounts for departments across the country. Public organizations also have a responsibility to provide the public with accurate information even if it could be viewed as unfavorable to the department. Public organizations acting in an ethical manner follow guidelines to ensure that “decisions and actions are based on what best serves the public's interests, as opposed to the official's personal interests (including financial interests) or self-serving political interests” (“Public sector...,” n.d., para. 1).

Law enforcement agencies have an obligation to act responsibly and provide the public with open and unbiased information. By viewing social media in the context of public relations and following ethical guidelines, public organizations gain credibility and better serve the public. When social media is used for the purpose of portraying an organization in the best light (visibility or coverage bias), it has ceased to become an unbiased tool, and it has shifted into the realm of a propaganda tool. Propaganda is defined by Jowett and O'Donnell (2011) as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that

further the desired intent of the propagandist" (p. 7). By organizations focusing on branding and promoting positive images, they are either intentionally or unwittingly acting as propagandists. Certainly there is nothing wrong with showing the positive impacts of law enforcement, but this information should be balanced with other forms of information expected by the public.

The policy frameworks that guide the organization's use of social media should be available to the public, and the public should have input on what information they expect to be provided. As long as the requested information is legal to be released, then it should be. If crime problems exist or are increasing, the public would probably want to be informed. General arrest and crime information should be available. The main function of police is law enforcement; yet if one views the social media accounts of many organizations, they clearly de-emphasize enforcement related activities. While many community service functions of police are of great value, the public should not be ignorant of what is occurring in their communities. Currently accreditation organizations such as CALEA which promote the use of model policies offer nothing in regard to social media being used as a public relations tool. If organizations are to establish legitimacy, they have a responsibility to the public to follow ethical guidelines when using social media.

The use of public relations by public administrations has been viewed with skepticism in recent decades. Police organizations are increasingly seeking ways to engage the public in order to enhance support and awareness. As the mediascape continues to shift to a population more engaged with social media, the public's expectations of what will be provided grows. Organizations should frame these

information exchanges in the context of public relations by developing public relations policy so serious ethical concerns can be avoided. The role of government in a democratic society is to be responsive to the people, not visa versa. This responsibility to the public means that the ethical concerns about public relations directly apply to departments' use of social media. Seitel (2007) wrote that "The practice of public relations is all about earning credibility. Credibility, in turn, begins with telling the truth. Public relations, then, must be based on doing the right thing in other words, acting ethically" (p.108).

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations code of conduct states that ethical principles include integrity, competence, transparency and confidentiality ("CIPR code..," 2017). The practice of public relations when viewed in a negative light is often accused of withholding information and promoting pseudo events. Cotterrell (1999) wrote "transparency is the availability of information on matters of public concern, the ability of citizens to participate in political decisions, and the accountability of government to public opinion or legal processes" (p. 414). Transparency in the police world is a delicate balance. Agencies must balance the public's right to open information while ensuring the privacy of citizens and employees, when dealing with confidential information.

Special care must be taken when releasing information pertaining to active investigations. In the digital age, the public is acclimated to instant information updates from news stories to weather. The ability to get real time information from departments about issues that directly affect the public is greatly valued. To build credibility, public organizations must build trust by providing true, accurate, and unbiased information.



Lee (2009) wrote “freedom of the press and freedom of information laws compel civil servants to be accountable to the news media and the public-at-large. Unlike their business and nonprofit cousins, they must be transparent” (p. 516).

The goal of being a transparent organization is to establish trust and credibility with the public. Koehn (2006) suggests that those who are viewed as holding a professional status are given a more weighted moral position, "since in this relation the professional is the trusted party and the client the trustor" (p. 54). Police departments as a group of professionals are held in a high moral status, and they are judged by the same standard. Police departments are privy to a vast amount of information that is unavailable to the public; at the same time, the public is aware of information that never reaches law enforcement. An ethical objective is to share information that would enhance the served population. Once credibility is established it follows that there would be increased public feedback.

It is not black and white when considering whether departments are doing a disservice to the public when using public relations to build support and their brand. It depends on what the citizenry expects the mission of their police department to be. The primary objective of law enforcement is stated clearly in the name “law enforcement.” This means that the objective is to uphold the law and arrest those who violate it. Arrest records are public information and crime locations are public information. Citizens of communities are naturally concerned about crime and they have a right to public information. An issue is that citizens may never learn of crime information if there are no policies requiring the release of this information. Another issue is that agencies may have political reasons to withhold crime information. Crime and arrests records are

objective forms of data that are needed if a population is to be informed. Any policy developed by a department should aim at increasing transparency and define what types of information will be shared. If the goal of a department is to be recognized as being legitimate, then trust must be established, and the only ethical way to develop trust is by striving towards transparency.

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Applying ethical guidelines to the use of social media could establish in policy certain transparency requirements pertaining to crime data. Sharing crime data could lead to an increased fear of crime. A great deal of academic research, including Cordner (2010), has shown that "fear of crime has a huge impact on American society. Individuals often choose where to live, shop, and socialize based on their perceptions of the relative safety of different cities, towns, and neighborhoods" (p. ix). Police departments are largely funded by (sales and property) taxes and people's willingness to shop and live within their jurisdictions.

By requiring the dissemination of crime information, the community's fear of crime could increase as their awareness increases. Skogan (2006) wrote that "fear can confine people to their homes, and it undermines their trust in their neighbors and, especially, in their neighbors' children. Fear is a key 'quality of life' issue for many people" (p. 255). The philosophy of community policing has long argued that the public perception of crime has a significant impact on citizen engagement. It can be argued that using social media as a tool to disseminate crime information, such as problem areas and arrests, could cause an increased fear of crime which would have a detrimental effect on social engagement.

It can be argued that citizen engagement is the true means of problem solving in communities. An uninformed populace can never truly be engaged. The demand from the public for more information is ever increasing. Residents want to know crime information that is specific to their demographics. Research from the British government shows “there are over 3.5m searches every month on Google for information on the police. In fact the majority of the public (58%) say their priority is information on how crime and anti-social behavior is being tackled in their area” (as cited in Copitch & Fox, 2010, p. 44). Additionally Myhill (2006) found that effective community engagement can have a positive impact on increasing the public’s feelings of safety and on improving police community relations.

More and more often police are turning to the public for assistance in solving cases. Information on unidentified suspects, missing and wanted persons should be posted in the interest of serving justice. Ediam (2016) wrote “the prevalence of social media has made it a valuable go-to investigative tool for law enforcement, whether for small-time crimes or more serious cases involving life and death” (para. 15). If agencies are concerned with ethics, then citizens deserve to know if they live in a high crime area, and they deserve to know if their neighbor was charged with a felony. If the mission of departments is justice, then fear of crime must be subordinate to the reality of crime. Administrations should be concerned with the irrational fear of crime but not the actuality of crime. When departments place building positive images as their primary function, they are acting unethically.

Many departments see social media as a means to build support and promote a positive image. These departments see social media as only one outlet through which

information is provided to the public. Holden (1996) observed that "the potential interconnection between public opinion and the success of public administration is one of the most profound realities to which political science may yet direct new attention" (p. 35). Channels such as media releases and traditional news coverage are viable outlets to provide information pertaining to crime and major cases. Social media is a communication tool that should be employed to meet the specific needs of the agency. In the wake of Ferguson and the rise of anti-police organizations such as Black Lives Matter, many agencies quickly moved to offer counter narratives. Public organizations must ensure that media information is spread in a way to build support and promote positive branding. Law enforcement is often plagued by negative media coverage. Sensationalistic news stories attract attention and higher ratings which equates to more advertising sales.

The byproduct of this cycle is the constant highlighting of the worse moments of law enforcement. Lee (2009) wrote that "once the news media has framed an issue (i.e., given it a spin that the press pack accepts as conventional wisdom), it is hard to change any public debate. If the media portrays something as a crisis, then it is" (p. 515). This type of coverage undermines the legitimacy of law enforcement and increases a confirmation bias among those with preexisting assumptions. Agencies have discovered that they can bypass traditional media channels through social media and spread positive information. Agencies have learned that they can humanize officers and build up their departments as distinct brands.

This natural tendency to counterbalance negative coverage is itself a form of bias (in the absence of an ethical framework). Bias by story selection is covering one aspect

of an incident without covering the other side. Choosing to highlight feel good stories while downplaying tragic events that departments routinely deal with is biased and unethical. Attempting to sway public opinion through content selection implies a unilateral relationship with the public.

To foster and develop a mutual relationship between the department and the public, administrators and employees must change their mindset from shaping perceptions (ends focused) to behaving in an ethical manner (means focused). A focus on shaping attitudes is unsustainable and can lead to a distrust of the medium through which the message was communicated. Using social media as a platform to sway public opinion in only one direction leads to ethical concerns. Departments will inevitably make mistakes and mishandle situations drawing criticism and negative attention. If departments attempt to sway public opinion, they are undermining their public trust and legitimacy.

According to Johannesen (2002) an ethical framework of information sharing would include public administrations having a “willingness to admit error and allow persuasion” (p. 70). By admitting errors and by admitting unflattering crime data, agencies are acting transparently and building the organization's legitimacy. Beetham (2013) wrote that “legitimacy involves the demonstrable expression of consent on the part of the subordinate to the particular power relation in which they are involved, through actions which provide evidence of consent” (p. 18).

Social media represents a different construct than media releases or network television because it invites instant feedback from citizens. This type of public two-way interaction has never been available prior to social media. Transparency and two way

communication are necessary if organizations are to act responsibly and ethically.

Redford (1969) wrote that “in a democratic society each agency bears a responsibility for informing people of the benefits and liabilities of its program and, except as required for national security or the privacy of its staff, for making its processes known to society” (p. 139).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Organizations such as CALEA who are at the forefront of developing model policy should adopt and propagate ethical guidelines for departments’ use of public relations. Graham, Avery, and Park (2015) wrote that “social media enable local governments to communicate important government information, extend government services, and garner feedback and ideas about government operations with citizens” (p. 386). By establishing policies regulating the use of social media, departments will have to consider the goals and objectives of this form of public relations. Public administrations should establish ethical guidelines within policy to ensure that departments build credibility and trust with the communities they serve.

Sections of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) largely mirror the thesis of this paper, that law enforcement agencies (as public organizations) should follow ethical guidelines for the dissemination of information through social media. The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) states, "Law enforcement agencies should adopt model policies and best practices for technology-based community engagement that increases community trust and access" (p. 3). The report also states "these policies and practices should at a minimum increase

transparency and accessibility, provide access to information (crime statistics, current calls for service), allow for public posting of policy and procedures” (p. 37).

While the report does not delve into the ethics of using social media, it shares many of the same concerns. To use social media ethically, agencies should view it as another form of public relations. Viewed in this context, agencies can establish policies that are transparent and meet the needs of the populations that they serve. Establishing policy will help codify ethical values and establish parameters to meet public expectations and ensure departmental responsibility.

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