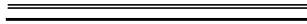# The Bill Blackwood
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Law Enforcement Agencies Should Use Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies are slowly adopting social media platforms to assist them in connecting to their citizenry. Law enforcement has little to no control over the message the media delivers about them. This lack of ability needs to be addressed and remedied. Law enforcement can use social media to provide information not published by traditional news organizations. This information can range from road closures to a monthly crime blotter detailing the calls for service on a weekly or monthly basis. Law enforcement should use social media as a resource to enhance their relationship with their citizenry, control their media presence, assist in criminal investigation, and provide a new line of communication. This paper will show the need for the use of social media exists and is currently being used by many larger agencies.

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INTRODUCTION

The ability for the average person to get information has never been easier. If one is seeking information regarding topics from the current state of the economy in Sri Lanka or what day they are allowed to water their lawn, a quick internet search will usually net the wanted information. Municipal, county, and state governments have embraced the use of the internet and have their own web pages. The information contained on these web pages tends to be stagnant. Examples would be the phone numbers for different departments, how to pay a bill or a fine, a list of commonly asked questions and their answers, or current job openings. Additionally, it is not easy for the viewer of the website to instantly obtain additional information or provide the agency with additional information. There is an inability to have open communication with the general public.

The ability to feed the hunger for constant new and updated information is lacking when only a web page is employed. Traditional media outlets quickly embraced new ways to release information. The local CBS often will manage a traditional website but usually have their own social media outlets as well. Social media are forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Currently, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the most popular and widely used social media sites. Pew Research (2015) stated 76% of online adults are using social media. Using social media, the news outlet can constantly update information as they receive it, receive tips on stories they may have not been made aware of, and receive photo and video of stories from the public.

Law enforcement relies heavily on the trust of the public. Without the legitimacy of governance, law enforcement will cease to be effective. One way to foster the relationship between law enforcement, its citizenry, and the media is to be as transparent as possible. A study of the largest 75 cities in the US and their social media usage showed the top–ranked cities made transparency a priority ("National Study," 2012). Another way to foster the relationship is to become more than just a group of police officers to show the citizenry there are people behind the badge and uniform. The use of social media by law enforcement agencies can allow both. Law enforcement agencies can keep its citizenry and the media abreast of current information. It can also highlight the human aspect of law enforcement to further show there are people behind the uniform. The use of social media can give a voice to anyone with access to a computer and the internet. Social media allows for the two-way exchange of information without needing face-to-face interaction.

This paper will discuss the benefits of law enforcement agencies using social media. It will also touch on potential negative aspects of using social media as a form of communication. Ultimately, it will state that law enforcement should use social media to connect to its citizenry and the media.

POSITION

Law enforcement agencies are missing a huge opportunity to connect to their community when they opt out of using social media. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) (2014) Center for Social Media stated that Facebook has 1.317 billion monthly active users and accounts for 23.39% of all internet activity. The ability to reach and communicate with that number of people was once impossible. Social

media can give the community access to the law enforcement agency. Statistics from IACP (2014) also showed the average Facebook user follows several different community pages. Examples of community pages range from an individual home owner's association to the government of the city they live in. People want to know what is happening in their community and seek the ability to communicate with those in the know. Stuart (2013) stated, "Departments that create a presence on social media sites open a new door of communication with the general public" (p. 7)

Law enforcement should be doing everything they can to provide ample opportunities for the general public to communicate with them. There has been research that indicates an individual who has contacted the police and has been satisfied with the results will tell three people about the experience. However, if someone has had a negative interaction with the police, they tend to tell ten people about the experience (Fazzini, 2003). Knowing this information, it would seem vital to the success of the agency that it would want to show the community who they are, what they do, and what they value. The community should know the crimes that occur within it and how law enforcement is working to reduce them. There has been additional research asking why members of the community lack trust in their law enforcement agency. One of the reasons given was a lack of the ability to voice complaints (Johnson, 1998). Knowing this information, law enforcement agencies should provide every possible line of delivery for complaints. It has been shown that there is a direct correlation between confidence in police services and visiting police social media outlets (Ruddell & Jones, 2013). The more people had contact with the police by way of social media, the more confident they were in the department.

When not using social media to connect to its community, law enforcement can control the information provided by the media. The media picks and chooses what stories will make it on air. They also have the ability to select what portion of the story is portrayed. Law enforcement's use of social can help get stories heard the media has not been interested in or in providing factual information if a mistake has been made (Stevens, 2011).

The Boston Police Department showed how their use of social media can quickly correct misinformation provided by the press in 2013 after the marathon bombing (Davis, Alves, & Slansky, 2014). Boston Police Commissioner Davis recognized the importance of getting the correct and complete story to the public as quickly as possible. Due to Boston's long standing use of social media, Commissioner Davis had the media relations office prepared to push information out the department had vetted, information they knew the public needed to know (Davis, Alves, & Slansky, 2014). The day after the bombing, some media outlets were publishing incorrect and inflated casualty reports and information stating a Saudi Arabian suspect had been arrested. The social media team of the Boston Police Department was able to correct this information using Twitter. As the search for the suspects continued, Boston police used social media as a way to communicate directly to the media. On April 19, Boston police used their Twitter account to ask the media to not broadcast live video of officers approaching search locations (Davis, Alves, & Slansky, 2014).

Furthermore, it has been shown the media has a tendency to report violent crime committed by individuals on the fringe of society (Kappler & Gaines, 2009). Law enforcement can use social media to present more of the day-to-day routine performed

by police. This can help reduce the unwarranted fear that the public holds that they will become victims of crime. Lieberman, Koetzle, and Sakiyama (2013) stated: "Social media provides departments with another avenue for communicating with the public. In contrast to traditional outlets, the use of social media provided departments with direct control over the type and nature of information disseminated" (p 441). Law enforcement should constantly work to craft their image. Having the ability to highlight positive acts performed by its members is invaluable. People should understand the majority of the police work is not responding to sensationalized calls.

Law enforcement agencies can also use social media to assist in criminal investigations. Stuart (2013) noted that law enforcement agencies, when using social media, "open a new door of communication with the general public" (p.7). This new line of communication can be used to help apprehend fugitives or assist in the identification of suspects. The Williamson County Sheriff's Office in Illinois has started using Facebook to assist in solving crime. In January of 2015, they had a string of burglaries but nothing more than some surveillance photos as evidence. The photos were posted to Facebook, and within a few hours, the suspects had been identified (Nordin & Livingston, 2015). Cohen (2010) stated, "In the vein of an Old West "Wanted" poster, displayed in the most trafficked area of town, modern-day law enforcement agencies are posting descriptions of criminals on today's most trafficked spots — namely the social web" (p. 11).

As previously stated, Facebook has 1.317 billion active users (IACP, 2014). Law enforcement can easily tap into a passive audience by simply providing pictures or descriptions of suspects. In addition to using social media to ask for help, police can

use social media to actively look for criminals. One of the early adopters of this strategy was Dawn Keating, a police officer for the City of Cincinnati. In 2008, Officer Keating used Facebook and the help of the University of Cincinnati to identify gang members (Knibbs, 2013). The amount of information available to law enforcement grows every year. The argument could be made that law enforcement should not only have a presence but should monitor social media as well. Phillips (2013) stated: "Social media is not just a "thing" but an environment that we work in and around. The volume and velocity of data available is ever-increasing from a broad variety of sources" (p. 2). Law enforcement can use social media to determine suspect's daily patterns, their friends, if they have weapons, and even the type of car their drive. Mt. Lebanon police in Pennsylvania stated in a 2014 news story that several of their active drug cases relied heavily on information found on Facebook (Aupperlee, 2014).

COUNTER POSITION

Law enforcement agencies have some hurdles to overcome when entering the world of social media. An argument could be made that maintaining a social media presence will take an employee's time away from their primary job function. Or, it could be said that the agency lacks the resources to maintain a presence on social media. Police Executive Research Forum (2013) stated that it is best to find an employee who is familiar with social media and already views it as useful. By doing this, the agency would find someone that will be efficient and not allow it to consume their day. Kingsley (2010) conducted a survey regarding the amount of time agencies spent maintaining their social medial presence. Government agencies have, for years, spent a large amount of time responding to multiple sources in order to push their

information to the community. Social media platforms have allowed agencies to actually reduce the amount of time spent working informational resources with the use of informatics. The results were that most agencies felt they spent "very little" time working on their social media. The same survey showed 80% respondents felt the importance of their social media presence was increasing (Kingsley, 2010). Furthermore, the 2015 IACP Social Media Survey stated that 58.3% of agencies surveyed spent between 1 to 5 hours a week on social media. This dispels the fear of social media becoming a time drain. Agencies always have the option of terminating their presence if they feel they cannot maintain it. Additionally, governmental agencies must understand that in today's society, the highest form of communication for the younger generations is through the use of social media. If a governmental organization desires to facilitate the most effective communication in the most efficient process, social media platforms appear to be the best route for dissemination.

Agencies may also be faced with legal concerns dealing with 1st amendment and record retention of communication that takes place on social media. Both issues can be addressed by the agency adopting a policy to define the purpose of the   social media site. Each social media site has different capabilities and settings; the policy will need to be broad enough to encompass any site the agency might use. The Institute for Local Government ("Social media and public agencies," 2013) uses the City of Seattle's policy as an example and explains, "The policy reserves the city's right to restrict or remove any content that is deemed in violation of its policy or applicable law; it also indicates its goal of approaching the use of social media tools as consistently as possible, enterprise wide" (p. 4). Ultimately, The Institute for Local Government ("Social

media and public agencies," 2013) advised that agencies will encounter unwanted or inappropriate posts or comments made by the public. The method that is least likely to incur liability would be to leave the comments or posts, correct any bad information, and let the other viewers assess the information presented.

Finally, an argument can be made that social media sites run by governmental organizations have a propensity to facilitate and promote the personal opinions of the site manager, local government officials, or others who should be impartial regarding their perspective on government resources and direction. The argument can be made that the person assigned to manage a governmental social media site would naturally respond to comments from a personal background or perspective. This could be troublesome if not monitored or thought through prior to placing responses on a public forum (Lampe, 2011). To assist the agency in remaining impartiality, it would be good practice to require a two-party approval prior to the publication of any information. This would assist in keeping the personal opinion of a single employee from overriding the intent of the social media platform as an unbiased governmental resource. The two-party approval would require very little additional time. The employee responsible for content would remain the primary contact; however, when not providing basic information such as road closures, training announcements, etc., they would have the information reviewed before posting.

RECOMMENDATION

The ability for law enforcement to communicate, build relationships, show transparency, and instantly update an unlimited amount of people exists today in social media. Not only is it currently available, but many large agencies are already using it.

The biggest benefit is that there is no cost to start using social media. Studies have shown most law enforcement agencies that currently use social media feel they spend very little time using it but feel that it is extremely important to their agency and mission (Kingsley, 2010). Obviously, much time is not being wasted trying to determine what to post or how to post it. The smallest of towns has information that would be helpful to those that live or work there.

The media, the citizens of the community, and those thinking about moving to the community all want to know they will be safe. With the media tending to only show fringe events, it can help ground any fears of a particular city being unsafe or prone to extraordinary amounts of crime. Social media use can reduce fear of crime by informing people what is actually occurring. It can assist in building the legitimacy of governance and raise the credibility of the agency.

Law enforcement agencies can start by using module policies available from the IACP Center for Social Media or other cities currently using social media. Once the policies are in place, the extent of usage is solely in the hands of the agency. The use can be as broad or as narrow as that agency sees fit and can be adjusted as they gain a following and receive feedback**.** Agency administrators should seek employees who are familiar with the social media platforms they intend to use. Each agency using social media will have a different experience due to the fact that every community is different.

Sir Robert Peele, who is credited as the founder of modern policing, listed 9 principles of policing. Number 7 states: "Police, at all times, should maintain a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that police are the

public and the public are the police…" ("Sir Robert Peel's Principles," 1829, p. 7). The intention of the police to have contact with the public has obviously been around for a long time. Law enforcement needs to adopt every possible method of communication and use social media to that end.

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