

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Law Enforcement and Social Media

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
James R. Lovel**

**Webster Police Department
Webster, Texas
February 2013**

ABSTRACT

With technology constantly evolving, law enforcement needs to be using social media to be more efficient. This topic is relevant because the way people receive and communicate information is constantly changing. Social media can be used by law enforcement to disseminate important information, to assist with investigative purposes, and to create email networks to share ideas. The sources for this paper include journals, articles, and websites. The major idea of this paper states that there are more positives than negatives with law enforcement's use of social media in order to be efficient. Based on research, with proper use of social media, law enforcement can stay current with new communication techniques.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	2
Counter Position	7
Recommendation	9
References	11

INTRODUCTION

In order for law enforcement to keep up with new and innovative technology in today's world, it is imperative for them to be connected to and using social media. Social media is defined as "technology in translation , it allows people with basic computer skills to tell their stories using publishing tools such as blogs, video logs, photo sharing, podcasting, and wikis" (Copitch & Fox, 2010m p. 44). Examples of social media in law enforcement include police department, district attorney, and court websites, Facebook, You Tube, Twitter, and e-mailing platforms.

Facebook is a social media website that connects friends and allows users to post photos (<http://www.facebook.com>). You Tube is a social media site that allows users to access and post short video clips. There is probably a You Tube video clip about any topic that one can imagine (<http://www.youtube.com>). Twitter is a social media networking site that allows users and followers to follow each other's "tweets" or comments that users post (<http://www.twitter.com>), and e-mail platforms are groups of users that can subscribe to and post discussions on specific topics.

All of the social media sites listed above are valuable tools that, when used properly, can help law enforcement do a more efficient job. However, there is much opposition about law enforcement using social media due to loss of productive work time and misuse. There are positive and negative attributes associated with law enforcements' use of social media. Yet, because the positives outweigh the negatives, law enforcement should use and be linked in to several forms of social media to increase job effectiveness.

POSITION

Most police departments in the United States have websites. These sites offer the public general information, including business hours, command structures, employment opportunities, training, and jail information. Since a great deal of information is provided on these websites, it keeps employees from having to answer these types of questions over the phone. In many cases, websites include the department's mission statement. The mission statement provides the public with the philosophy and policing style used. Policing styles differ due to community and crime concerns. All of the leaders within the police departments are normally listed on the agency's websites, showing who is in charge of certain divisions. Therefore, if there is problem in a certain area, the public can have direct information on whom to call or e-mail concerning an issue. These websites are increasingly becoming more and more interactive. Many sites provide users access to file citizen complaints, give officers commendations, and leave crime related tips.

The new generation of computers and smart phone users do not rely on looking things up in the phone book anymore. The public can do a quick search in Google, get the desired department's information, and then make necessary calls. With almost any company, telephone automation has taken over, making it almost impossible to get an operator on the other end of the telephone line. Hence, law enforcement websites provide the public quicker means to information, making the overall use of these sites more efficient for all users involved.

The International Association of Chief of Police survey in 2010 reported that 81% of 278 respondents use social media (Jones & Johnson, 2011). Therefore, the trend in

law enforcement of using social media is increasing. This high percentage of involved agencies speaks for itself. It is proof that agencies need to get involved with social media to better conduct business.

In Canada, the Vancouver Police Department uses Facebook as an interactive page that allows users access to discussions of local crime issues, to view upcoming community events, and to serve as an effective forum for recruitment. They also use a blog that helps the department develop a stronger relationship with the community by bridging the gap between the users and the post author Cst. Sandra ("Best ways," 2011). As a result, social media and the Vancouver community have new channels of communications, which directly add to the department's overall effectiveness.

The Boca Raton, Florida police department uses other forms of social media as well, in order to better connect with their community. This department has implemented a crime prevention strategy called VIPER, which stands for Visibility, Intelligence, Partnerships, Education, and Resources. VIPER is connected to Twitter and sends out messages that involve crime reports, traffic updates, prevention, safety advice, traffic updates, and educational information. In addition, the department has a Facebook page which is used as a "two-way channel for discussing and sharing crime information between the public and the PD" ("Best ways police," 2011, para. 7). In emergency situations, the police department uses Nixle, a service that provides immediate information through text and e-mail. The Chief of Police, Dan Alexander, is also dialed in to social media by having his own Twitter and blog ("Best ways," 2011, para. 7). With all of the interactive social media that this department is using, there is no doubt that they are providing general information and a service that is technologically innovative.

Another reason that law enforcement should be using social media is to assist in criminal investigations. Detectives often use Facebook, You Tube, and other web-based investigative sites, such as Leads Online and Vigilant Video to gather valuable information when investigating crimes. Using these social media sites give insight and explicit clues and details to help law enforcement investigator's do a more efficient job.

Of course, one of the biggest responsibilities of law enforcement is protecting children. Many police departments solicit child predators by creating and using fake user names in internet chat rooms. Chat rooms are a type of social media instant messaging websites that allow a group of users to chat on different topics at one time. Each particular internet user has a one-of-a-kind specific Internet Protocol or IP address that links back to their computer or smart phone. With proper training and access to different social media sites, detectives are able to catch predators lurking in these social media chat rooms that target inappropriate dialogue and meetings with children.

Detective Crystal Nosal, an Arlington County police spokeswoman, stated, "social media online chat rooms are used in investigation cases of adults soliciting minors for sex. The department originally started using social media in 2008, in hopes of determining sex predators by urging teens to become "friends" with the local police" (Babay, 2011, para. 4). After inappropriate solicitations are made to police investigators, they are able to subpoena social media ownership papers, making the link to the owners, which help police officers gather probable cause to file criminal charges.

In addition, some investigators also create fake Facebook accounts to lure in different types of criminals. Law enforcement, in general, has had problems locating information on teenagers because they are too young to possess a driver's license or

state identification card. However, Facebook is so popular with teenagers that it acts as a database where many younger people can be easily located. Babay (2011) stated that there is a staggering number of people using social networking sites. This source adds that there are 750 million people on Facebook, 200 million on Twitter, and 100 million on Myspace. With so many users of social media sites, the importance of law enforcement using these sites for investigative purposes is vital. The Roanoke Virginia Police "has used Facebook, and other social media sites in gang, drug, and cyber-bullying investigations" (Jones & Johnson, 2011, para. 15).

Facebook also acts as a great social media tool to assist many divisions in law enforcement. Many warrant officers within police departments also use fake Facebook accounts and send friend request to violators with outstanding warrants. Once the unsuspecting violator accepts the friend request, the warrant officer is allowed access to post information on the violator's wall. The warrant officer can post a message on the violator's wall for all of his friends to see that he or she has outstanding warrants and that he or she owes the city or county court a specific fine amount. Once this type of embarrassing information is posted on the violator's Facebook wall, it usually makes him or her act fast and pay the outstanding warrants. Thus, the use of social media has increased efficiency for law enforcement to clear outstanding warrants.

Many detectives subscribe to a social media, web-based law enforcement only site called Leads Online in an effort to recover stolen property. Leads Online allows detectives access to check stolen items' serial numbers on all items pawned at the local pawn shops. It goes without saying that many stolen items are taken by criminals to pawn shops for quick cash. In order to keep pawn shops honest, many cities, by city

ordinance, require pawn shops to be members of Leads Online and enter all of their items received into the Leads on Line data systems for law enforcement to access.

Leads Online is an outstanding social media site used by law enforcement to locate and recover stolen property (<http://www.leadsonline.com>). This social media site has replaced the old job of having law enforcement go to local pawn shops and check pawn tickets for matches of reported stolen property. The whole process is now automated, thus saving time and money for pawn shops and law enforcement.

Another social media site that assists law enforcement with locating and recovering stolen vehicles is called Vigilant Video. Vigilant Video is a company exclusive to law enforcement. It provides quick scans on vehicles' license plates. The license plate scanners are mounted onto marked law enforcement patrol units. These automatic license plate scanners conduct quick checks and alert law enforcement if a vehicle has been reported stolen. Once the alert is made, the law enforcement official can verify whether or not the vehicle has been stolen and a recovery can be made, giving the public better police service.

In addition to the license plate scanners, Vigilant Video provides another service called *Hot List*. If a detective has a list of stolen vehicle license plates, he or she can enter the stolen plates into the *Hot List* system. Then if the plate was run before it was reported stolen, the list will alert the local police, giving a general geo verified location of where the license plate was last scanned (<http://www.vigilantvideo.com>) .

YouTube is another social media outlet that law enforcement uses to assist with investigations. Many law enforcement agencies have You Tube links connected to their home website pages that provide short video clips of unidentified criminals engaging in

a criminal acts. This allows viewers of the videos to provide feedback to the investigative divisions, which helps identify the unknown criminal violators. The Midland Police Department in Texas uses a MPD "channel in an effort to identify unknown suspects" (<http://www.youtube.com/midlandpd>). The channel is linked into the agency website and "allows people to view suspect video from surveillance or in-store crime video in hopes that citizens will identify the suspect(s)" (<http://www.youtube.com/midlandpd>).

Social media also acts as a platform for law enforcement groups. In order to be a part of these groups, employment as a law enforcement official first has to be verified. Specialized groups within law enforcement are able to cover emerging issues in list serve e-mail formats. One of the best things about being a part of these list serve platforms is that if an officer has a problem or question, it can be posted and, within minutes, others in the group can respond with solutions.

Many criminal organizations use social media to promote their purpose. Gangs use social media and "brag about crimes and broadcast the glitzy image of gang life to a wider audience than ever before; authorities believe gangbusters are drawing people into a lifestyle that may seem appealing, but almost always ends bloody" ("North Jersey police," 2011, para. 6). Therefore, it stands without reason that law enforcement needs to be using social media to see what criminal organizations are doing and be proactive to stay one step ahead of their next move.

COUNTER POSITION

However, one of the biggest oppositions to the use of social media in law enforcement is the amount of productivity and quality work time that could be wasted.

The big argument here is that "web surfing on company time robs the employer of paid work, and it exposes companies to legal liability associated with inappropriate or illegally downloaded content," said InternetSafety.com CEO, Forrest Collier (Maurer, 2010, para. 9). In a survey, by this same company, it was reported that 87% of employees access their Facebook accounts for up to two hours a day without having a business purpose (Maurer, 2010).

While this may be true, law enforcement agencies can have the IT or Information Technology division limit the access of social media sites by putting filters on users' computers. Employers can also monitor web viewing habits to reduce excessive social media un-related work access (Maurer, 2010). With this application, the un-related work use of social media sites can be reduced or eliminated. With law enforcement focused more on work related tasks, efficiency will surely improve.

Another counterpoint to law enforcement using social media is the embarrassing and damaging effects that can be brought upon the reputation of the user and the department in which that employee works due to misuse. One follower of this idea stated that police should be banned from using social media to make statements to the public. This source added that "irresponsible use of social media is dangerous and likely to prejudice justice" ("Ban the police," 2011, para. 1). Many believe there is no reason why resources should be used to update Twitter. In addition, this source says that "given the harm it causes, we ask that the police be banned from using social media for public relations so that their resources can be put to better use" ("Ban the police," 2011, para.1).

Law enforcement users of social media need to be cautious by making sure that they do not post or mention any work related information or operation. This could jeopardize a criminal case or reveal sensitive information that should not be accessible to the public. Defense attorneys can access law enforcement officials' inappropriate photos or videos from social media sites and use them against officers by putting their creditability in question during criminal trials. If social media is misused by officers, police administrations can and will discontinue access to useful investigative sites. Unfortunately, when anything is misused, even if only by a few, it is often taken away and the valuable resource is lost.

Because the use of social media is an invaluable resource, it would be unwise to take it away all together. Instead, departments should have strict policies in place so that it is not misused. For example, employees should not post information that would discredit the employer's department. Violation of this policy could result in direct, progressive disciplinary action to the user for the misuse.

RECOMMENDATION

Again, the positive application of the use of social media strongly outweighs the negative. Law enforcement should be using a multitude of different social media to conduct more a more efficient job. By using websites that pass on general information and interactive communications with the community, using social media for investigative purposes, and being privy to exclusive e-mail crime trend platforms, law enforcement is staying current with technology for providing better service to the community. The lost work time and misuse of social media can be easily controlled through the use of filters blocking access to sites and enforcing strong discipline with misuse. With controlled

and directed use for law enforcement purposes, users will be more inclined to stay out of legal trouble and increase overall job effectiveness. Without the use of social media by the law enforcement, they will not be able to as effectively conduct business in a world that continues to change with technology.

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