The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Social Media;
Electronic Community Policing

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

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October 2020

ABSTRACT

In today's world, social media is an ever-growing conduit between community members. Many groups, individuals, and companies are successfully utilizing various social media platforms to communicate with other users. Even with the prevalence and ease of communication that social media provides, many law enforcement agencies are hesitant to use it as a tool to communicate with their communities. However, with the successes in communication and interaction through the use of social media in many areas of society today, including many other police agencies, the use of social media should be a tool that is utilized by all law enforcement agencies.

As community outreach and community interaction are a mainstay in community policing, so are they a mainstay in social media. There have been many examples of use of social media by law enforcement, ranging from crime prevention tips to helping solve crimes. However, fears remain about the use of personnel time and negative feedback that may be voiced for all to read on social media. Statistics show that there is actually a relatively small amount of time dedicated to maintaining social media interaction with the community. While negative feedback on social media sites does occasionally occur, through proper training of personnel and implementation of proper departmental policies and social media site guidelines, the ability to control responses and clarify mistruths through social media greatly decrease the negative images from that feedback.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as "forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)" (para. 1). Many law enforcement agencies strive to find ways to communicate with their communities so they can share information, including everything from safety tips and upcoming community activities, ideas such as how to help secure a residence, and other content such as emergency warnings and criminal activity notifications and alerts. This parallel in the activities of social media and in the goals of law enforcement has come to the attention of many law enforcement agencies. As technology has improved and mobile electronic communication has evolved, the stated activities of social media have evolved as well.

The high powered mini computers that many carry, commonly referred to as "smart phones", have become a part of life for people of all ages, all walks of life, and every socioeconomic group. According to Wang (2013), an estimated 6 billion of the 7 billion people in the world have access to mobile phones, while only about 4.5 billion have access to working toilets. Many cell phones allow users to access Internet anywhere they go. This ease of access has greatly increased the ability of social media users to stay in touch with each other via their mobile devices, including those mobile devices of the over one billion users of Facebook. In fact, Facebook has 600 million mobile users (Ortutay, 2012). As social media use has increased, many law enforcement agencies are embracing social media for its implications for communication and social interaction. Some agencies successfully use Facebook for

posting the status of major traffic issues or information about major offenders and outstanding warrants. However, even with the prevalence of social media and its embrace by many law enforcement agencies, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) 2013 Social Media Survey revealed 42.9% of agencies not using social media are not even considering it. Some reasons for this lack of consideration of social media are based around the time and technology issues, while other departments may have concerns about privacy and legal issues. Social media's prevalence and its ease of access reduces the technological expertise and equipment necessary for departments to interact on social media. This makes access to, and interaction with, social media much easier than previous iterations of social media. In this age of transparency and considering the parallels in social media's defined activities and the law enforcements desired communication with the community, social media is a tool that should be in every law enforcement agencies' tool boxes. Law enforcement agencies should use social media to increase communication with the community.

POSITION

One of the key reasons for and benefits of any social media platform is interaction among the online community of that platform. There are many ways for all users to utilize and benefit from social media, and law enforcement agencies are no different. As various policing models used by different law enforcement agencies continue to change, there is one focus that continues to get much attention. This focus is on the importance of police/community outreach and interaction. From community policing to intelligence led policing, interaction and communication with the community play a vital role in modern policing models. According the Hawdon and Ryan (2013),

earning the trust of, and working in cooperation with, the community are the two central tenets of community policing. The focus of community policing is clearly on police-community interaction, while according to Carter (2004) "in many ways, ILP (Intelligence led policing) is a new dimension of community policing, building on tactics and methodologies developed during years of community policing experimentation" (p. 41). Interaction with the community has become a mainstay of policing. Communication is an essential part of that interaction. Community outreach and community interaction also happen to be a mainstay of social media through the unique methods of instant and widespread communication that it offers its users.

With the emphasis placed on community outreach and community interaction by both social media and by law enforcement agencies, the first focus of law enforcement in its use of social media should be its use in these areas. Many police departments have found ways through the years to interact and engage with their community. According to Anthony Guglielmi, Director of Public Affairs for the Baltimore Police Department, this engagement of the community is very important (NLECTC, 2010). People keeping track of issues are hopefully going to take part in partnering with police and participating in community groups. These interactions include many interesting ideas such as foot patrols, beat meetings, bicycle patrol, attendance of home owner association meetings, and even trading cards with a picture and brief history of individual officers (NLECTC, 2010). While all of these are good and effective methods of interacting with and engaging the community, they also all require some degree of face-to-face transaction to take place. Unfortunately, law enforcement cannot be everywhere at once, nor can its audience constantly be with law enforcement all the

time. Social media allows for law enforcement to bridge this gap in its interaction with the community. According to the IACP (2013) "73.1% of agencies state that social media has improved police-community relations in their jurisdiction" (p.1).

As previously stated, one of the primary functions of social media is for community outreach and community interaction. This makes social media the ideal platform for law enforcement agencies to do this very thing. Of the law enforcement agencies that use social media, 70.4% use it for community outreach and citizen engagement (IACP, 2013, p. 3). Agencies can also use social media as a way to notify the community of various aspects of the police department that may not have otherwise been pushed out to the community. This could include many of an agency's successes, achievements, and accomplishments. There are not many citizens aware of which officers were nominated for officer of the month, nor which one was selected.

Perhaps more importantly, even fewer members of the community are aware of the stories of outstanding police work that these nominees accomplished to be nominated for the honor. Many times, departments are awarded grants for a variety of different projects which go unnoticed by the community. The requisite notifications, if any, are buried in the back of the local paper and usually overlooked by the majority of the community. Many of these grant projects are extremely beneficial not only to the receiving agency, but primarily to the public which it serves. Many times, departments participate in larger projects involving many members of the agency volunteering their time. Some of these may include food drives for local food banks and "Blue Santa" type Christmas programs in which officers help a needy family during the holiday season. These and many other such accolades that would possibly be overlooked or not

advertised at all will find new life and farther-reaching recognition when posted on social media.

Other community interactive communication that law enforcement agencies could use social media for may include crime prevention activities, notification of crime problems, and providing immediate emergency or disaster related information to the community. Social media can be used to instantly alert community members of recent crime problems, such as a large number of unlocked vehicles being burglarized in the community or a robbery that occurred in an area. Precautionary and crime prevention tips could also be immediately sent out to the community in an effort to encourage people to lock their cars, not go out alone, and be aware of their surroundings. Emergency notification of disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, or other natural disasters, or of major traffic accidents causing major traffic congestion could also be accomplished through the use of social media. In August 2011, an earthquake measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale originated in Mineral, Virginia. Indvik (2011) noted that "tweets began pouring in from D.C. nearly 30 seconds before we felt the quake at our headquarters in New York City and well before any reports about the quake emerged from the media" (para. 2). All of this type of community interaction and communication can serve to enhance agency images. More importantly, as Brewer and Bray (2014) point out, this interaction can serve to enhance intelligence-gathering initiatives, reduce traffic crashes, and prevent crime throughout the jurisdiction, thereby improving the quality of life throughout the community.

In addition to the above stated benefit, another use for social media by law enforcement is to assist with criminal investigations. According to the IACP (2013), this

is the most common use of social media by law enforcement agencies, with 86.1% of the 500 surveyed agencies using social media for criminal investigations. Social media can be used to assist in criminal investigations in a variety of ways. One such way is through the department simply asking its social media community for tips on crimes that may be occurring. However, due to social media being accessible to anyone, including the criminal, requests for tips of this nature are often asked to be either called in by phone or emailed to a particular email address to help ensure the safety of the responding community (NLECTC, 2010, p. 2).

Another way which law enforcement agencies use social media in criminal investigations is through monitoring social media. Due to the false feeling of anonymity and invulnerability that is often generated by using the impersonal keyboard of a computer, many criminals actually use social media to brag about some of their illegal activities, often posting pictures of themselves with illegal narcotics or firearms. This, has led to improved intelligence gathering techniques. For example, as pointed out by Brewer and Brey (2014) "the agency's intelligence analysts have become adept at using social media to gather information on suspects' associates, acquaintances, and hobbies, which are valuable to detectives in the creation of investigative matrices" (para. 3). Additionally, witnesses may come forward or are discovered as a result of information posted on social media as well. One example involved shots fired at officers in New York from a high-rise apartment complex. According to COPS (2013), "Soon after the incident, a YouTube video was posted online that led officers to a previously unidentified witness. The video also helped to identify the location from which the shots were fired" (p. 14).

As law enforcement becomes more aware of the various ways that information can be provided from many social media platforms, information gathered and analyzed will become a more and more powerful tool in an investigators tool box. Methods ranging from simply asking for information on a recent crime, assistance in the identification of suspects from an in-store video recording, to monitoring social media activity of known or suspected criminals make social media an ideal source for investigative information for a variety of cases.

COUNTER POSITION

Many believe that although social media may have many very positive applications, some of which have been stated above, they still have concerns. One of the primary concerns about the use of law enforcement using social media is the amount of time personnel will have to use to effectively interact with the community via social media. Of the 500 agencies surveyed by the IACP (2013), 44.1% of those not using social media listed resource constraints of personnel and time as the top barrier to using social media (p. 8). As it currently stands, most social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, currently have no cost for the use of the actual media. Additionally, due to the wide use of social media, the chances are that many employees are already familiar with its use, therefore necessary training time and costs would be minimal, if it was required at all. Since social media platforms are designed as a platform to easily build relationships, a little bit of effort goes a long way, minimizing the amount of time necessary to effectively utilize these platforms.

While time and personnel are indeed necessary to maintain social media activity with the community, the benefits far outweigh the minimum expenditure of each

involved. Of the agencies surveyed by the IACP (2013) that identified themselves as agencies using social media, 62.6% indicated that they spent only between one and five hours per week maintaining the agencies' social media presence. This is equivalent to between approximately eight minutes to 43 minutes per day, since social media requires interaction seven days per week. This small time commitment for maintaining the social media presence includes time spent developing and posting content, responding to comments, and other necessary activities to maintain the agencies' social media presence. In addition to simply maintaining the agencies' social media presence, of the same group, 59.9% only use between one and five hours per week using social media tools for intelligence or investigative purposes (IACP, 2013).

Over the years since community policing and police-community interaction became a mainstay of law enforcement, countless hours have been spent attempting to become involved with the community and keep them abreast of information and to become part of the community. As Hawdon and Ryan (2003) point out, "if they are successful at becoming part of the community, the police can effectively utilize those informal networks to diffuse crimes before they occur or solve the crimes that do occur" (p. 57). With a tool as powerful as social media assisting law enforcement agencies to effectively utilize those informal networks and at a combined cost of less than an hour and a half per week for maintaining agencies' social media presence and using the investigative powers offered by using social media, use of social media is well worth the expenditure in personnel and time.

Another concern about the use of social media by law enforcement agencies is the fear that negative posts on social media can damage the image of the agency within

the community. According to Dionne Waugh, a spokeswoman for the Richmond Police Department (RPD) "…some managers were concerned that the site would attract too many inappropriate comments and police criticism" (as cited in Wagley, 2013, para. 6). Agencies have spent much time building up their images in the eyes of the community they serve. Countless meetings, newsletters, face-to-face interactions, and a plethora of other interactions over time have made agencies' images what they have become today. Most if not all of these agencies have had bumps in the road and interactions that were less than positive towards their image. Some of the bumps and bruises received over the years to various law enforcement agencies have come from individuals. While the RPD expressed concerns and worries about inappropriate comments and police criticism by individuals on its social media sites, Wagley (2013) noted that only approximately a dozen posts had to be removed during the first eleven months after its site launched.

While some of the bumps and bruises received over the years to various agency images were from individuals, many of these bumps were in the media where agencies have little or no control over what the reporters write or which phrases were selected from those carefully worded press releases from the agency. To add salt to the wound, many of these media reports offer little or no vehicle for response from the agency. However, through use of social media, as Jones & Johnson (2011) point out, agencies can promptly answer citizen questions when asked, and correct inaccurate or incomplete information posted by the media. This control over the presentation of the message in its entirety is because of the control social media gives departments over

how much and what type of information is presented to the public, rather than relying on traditional media outlets (Lieberman, Koetzle, & Sakiyama, 2013).

While there is likely to be some limited negative sentiment toward a particular agency or to law enforcement in general, in social media, this sentiment is probably already present in communities to a limited degree. Many users of social media that hold this sentiment have probably already made negative comments towards the agency and will probably continue to do so, whether or not the agency has a social media presence. At least if the agency that is being scrutinized has a social media presence, they have the ability to affect, or at least monitor, the conversation and minimize the negative effect.

RECOMMENDATION

Communication and interaction with the community is essential for law enforcement agencies. Social media should be one of the ways that this communication and interaction is accomplished. Social media, by its nature, is designed for interaction of communities. As technology continues to make great strives and smart phones and other smart devices continue to advance as well, social media is a very cost-effective way to help law enforcement establish, build upon, and maintain a presence in the community in a manner never before possible. Community outreach and community interaction is one of the primary ways in which social media can be used by law enforcement agencies. It can be used to reach out to the community to inform them about trending crime problems, simply to invite them to a neighborhood watch meeting, or to instantly disseminate emergency information.

Although there are concerns by some agencies about the amount of time and personnel required to maintain a social media presence, surveys have shown that approximately 60% of agencies using social media spend less than 45 minutes per day to do this (IACP, 2013). This almost insignificant amount of time and personnel being spent on a product that has as much positive potential as social media is well worth the investment. Concerns about negative posts on social media damaging agencies' images were also addressed, pointing out that this negative posting is most likely already occurring but with no ability for law enforcement to address or guide the conversation in a more positive or strategic manner without the use of social media by the agency. Additionally, in at least one instance, the number of negative or inappropriate posts having to be addressed was extremely small.

Like any communication or activity that represents the agency, it is recommended that an agency have a policy to guide social media interactions by the agency and its employees and also to address guidelines about what the public can post on agency social media sites. Model policies for agencies' use of social media are available from several sources including the IACP's (2013) Center for Social Media. Overall, the massive benefits of social media and the increased positive interactivity with the community make law enforcement's use of social media well worth the few minor issues that are produced. Chief Michael Scott of the Mt. Rainier Police Department sums it up nicely when he says, "The value is community relations and the information that flows out breaks down the traditional barriers between police and the community and gives police a face to the community" (NLECTC, 2010, p. 4).

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