The Effects of Social Media on Law Enforcement

Captain Kevin Clouatre, Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office
Sergeant Michael Dean, St. John the Baptist Sheriff's Office
Major Stacy Fortenberry, Ascension parish Sheriff's Office
Lieutenant Christian Johnson, St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office
Lieutenant Mark Lyons, Bossier Sheriff's Office
Lieutenant Amanda Pertuis, St. Charles Sheriff's Office
Assistant Chief Ed Reeves, Wetumpka Police Department

Abstract

Social media was born when a website named Six Degrees was launched in 1997, enabling people all over the world to create a profile that was viewable by others and to connect to other users' profiles. MySpace and LinkedIn expanded the social media universe a few years later, followed by YouTube in 2005. The following year saw the emergence of Facebook and Twitter, which forever changed the way many people communicate with each other and receive information. With the additions of Reddit, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Messenger, WeChat, QQ, Tumblr, Qzone, Viber, Pinterest, Line, Telegram, Medium and many more, social media continues to grow exponentially in size and influence. Strong and unwavering law enforcement leadership is needed to successfully navigate the tangled web of social media while utilizing its unique benefits to an agency's advantage. In this paper, we show the challenges thrust upon law enforcement via social media, the positive ways social media effects policing and the leadership needed to survive the flames.

The Effects of Social Media on Law Enforcement

Social media has become an enormous part of daily life for most Americans. We use it to stay in touch with friends, show off accomplishments, share things we find funny, complain about things that annoy us and so much more. Most of us use social media several times per day, utilizing a wide array of destinations. Law enforcement agencies large and small struggle to keep up with the unique challenges presented by such fast-past information sharing among our communities. With this in mind, we will first look into the growth of social media and how embedded it has become in most lives. We will then discuss the steps leaders can take to lessen the impact of a chaotic event caused by, or enflamed through, social media. Next, we will show ways that law enforcement lights itself on fire, harming the agency and its reputation via social media. Moving on, we will show several ways that others set fires via social media to harm, or promote harm, to law enforcement. Then, we will show many positive effects social media has on law enforcement which waters down the flames. Finally, we will show the leadership needed to extinguish the flames. The purpose of this paper is to point out the positive and negative effects social media brings to law enforcement and the need for strong, credible leadership and the steps they can take to alleviate some of the issues brought on by social media.

Growth of Social Media

Increasingly, social media has become a daily source of news for many. According to one study, roughly 60% of Americans now get their news directly from social media (Matsa & Shearer, 2016). According to the most recent census information, there are over 235 million adults in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2019). We are faced with over 160 million adults that are getting their news from social media. If all things were accurate and honest, this would not be a problem. According to an article by K. Matsa and E. Shearer, the

information available at a person's fingertips can be correct, incorrect, vague, misleading, a partial truth or an outright lie. Unfortunately, most do not bother attempting to find out which of these categories fall into that they are reading. Too many people feel it comes from a trusted source, such as something they subscribe to, a well-known media outlet, a friend or even just an acquaintance (Matsa & Shearer, 2016).

With our communities getting their news from social media, because there is no apparent counterbalance to what they are consuming. It is our experience that most people subscribe to outlets they already agree with and surround themselves with like-minded friends. If they are not receiving any new thoughts or altering points of view to, their viewpoints will never be challenged. We find that people want affirmation of their point of view and want to feel that they are right. So, in their mind, based on 'the news' they consume, they are.

We have seen podcasts gain tremendous popularity in recent years on social media. They do not appear to make an effort to disguise themselves as news, but still inform millions about events in the news every day, with added commentary to go with it. Of course, in our opinion, the commentary people are listening to is an opinion they already share, so they can now get their daily dose of news with the thoughts they would usually formulate after watching or reading it said out loud for them. We see that being used as a way for people to avoid thinking for themselves and it appears many subscribe to that way of thinking.

In our opinion, people avoiding altering points of view and debate creates a problem, which is more apparent every day. People no longer seem to be open-minded and attack any view that is not their own. We feel many have been indoctrinated, often by themselves, into believing they are completely right and everything else is wrong because the skewed version of news they have been receiving for years says so. This, of course, does not encompass every

American that gets news from social media. We see many that think for themselves and just want

the facts to use as a basis for formulating their own opinion. Law enforcement must figure out a

way to reach out to all individuals to share more accurate information to this base.

      Law enforcement has become fully entangled by social media in this time of fast-paced

technological advancement and most have struggled to keep up. A recent study showed that 73%

of adults in America use their cell phones to access YouTube, 68% use their phones to access

Facebook and another six social media sites are accessed via cell phone by 20% or more of the

communities we serve (Anderson & Smith, 2018). The combination of smartphones and social

media gives everyone the ability to share information with millions of others in the blink of an

eye. Not only that, but once it is online, it is online forever. Law enforcement leaders must fully

embrace the power and impact of social media going forward. As Sloly (2012) said,

> Social media should be mainstreamed into all operations, from crime prevention
> to intelligence gathering, from next-generation computer-aided dispatch to
> criminal investigations, public order management, and community policing. It
> also must become one of the main Information Technology tools for reducing
> costs and improving public values in areas like human resources, professional
> standards/risk management, finance and administration, information management,
> performance management, and public/ private partnerships.(p. 10).

      The reliance of social media and how interwoven it has become in today's society was on

full display during Hurricane Harvey in 2017 when residents pleaded for help on Facebook and

Twitter rather than calling 911. A particularly terrifying tweet about a nursing home in

Dickinson, Texas, was shared over 4800 times. Not only did it show elderly residents

sitting in green flood water, but it also pushed the nursing home to the top of the rescue

priority list. All of the home's residents were successfully rescued and taken to safety

(Rhodan, 2017).

On February 26, 2012, a teenager named Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by a member of the local Community Watch. His mother posting an online petition calling for the arrest of his killer. It foreshadowed what was to come, as well-known activists became involved, several celebrities and President Barack Obama spoke out and it was all feverishly shared on social media. In the end, the petition drew over 2.2 million signatures. The calls for justice over that incident remained largely online, but a mostly peaceful march of a few hundred protestors was held in New York City (Flock, 2012).

The deaths of Eric Garner on July 17, 2014, Michael Brown a few weeks later and Freddie Gray the following year, led to an explosion of anti-police posts, videos, comments and articles across all forms of social media. There were also dozens of protests nationwide organized on social media that became largely violent and destructive. Unfortunately, this has become the new normal. Incidents are no longer being judged on the circumstances or facts. Instead, they are judged using emotions and fueled by rhetoric from all sides.

People have used social media to convince a large segment of the population that isolated incidents in different jurisdictions are part of a nationwide conspiracy to suppress minorities. There is no data to support that argument but sharing that information has had no impact on the violence that has erupted over the past month since George Floyd's death on June 8, 2020.

From a 140-character blurb on Twitter to a 128 GB video clip on YouTube, social media has become both a blessing and a curse that can make law enforcement's day better or worse at any given moment. Strong leadership is needed more than ever to pilot agencies in the right direction.

Once the environment is understood, leaders must make every effort to avoid becoming the next social media firestorm. There are several steps that can be taken to insulate an agency as much as possible. First, the culture of the agency must be excellent. As Therwanger (2017) said, "Culture is exactly at the level of your tolerance for poor performance." Raise the bar now, because raising it after an incident will be exponentially harder to do. It is important to lead by example and gain buy-in from personnel. Doing so raises the level at which they will hold themselves, and each other, accountable. As Scott (2017) pointed out, "You need to show them excellence in action and inspire them to want to as well." Once that is accomplished, social media specific items need to be addressed.

More than 96% of law enforcement agencies are already using social media in some form (Cohn & Liao, 2016). Leaders need to ensure it is being used correctly so that it is a benefit, not a hindrance, to their agency. First, there must be a policy in place for personnel to adhere to when using social media, so they know what the agency considers inappropriate content and when it is appropriate to display themselves as a representative of the agency. This is especially important for new recruits, as most of them nowadays are Millennials that grew up with social media, and it is a part of everything most of them do. However, it is important to know that many legal issues surrounding these restrictions of free speech have not yet been settled in the court system, so the policy will have to be amended as necessary when those cases are resolved. Social media training should also include ways for personnel to secure their personal information. In 2018, ANTIFA posted the names, photos, job titles, names of cities they work in and links to the LinkedIn profiles of almost 1600 Immigration and Custom Enforcement employees on Twitter, because it was unsecured for anyone to see (Lemon, 2017). Personnel should also be aware that

posting photos from a cell phone can reveal the location they are sharing it from, which could be their home or office if their GPS functions are enabled.

Leadership Role Before the Flames

It is vitally important to ensure personnel know the ever-changing laws involving their behavior with social media. According to Rowinski (2010), the Boston Police Department found itself in all kinds of social media and legal trouble when officers began stopping the public from videotaping them. Under the state's wiretapping act, they arrested an attorney for recording them during an incident with his cellphone. The officers made the argument that videotaping them while performing their duties was legal, but the audio recording of what they said during the incident was not. After numerous court battles, the case was settled a little more than two years later, ending with the Department paying the man arrested $170,000 for damages and legal fees (Rowinski, 2010). Leaders must ensure officers are not only aware that they are most likely being recorded at all times, but it is legal for bystanders to do so from a safe distance. A positive side-effect of this is that many officers have become more deliberate in what they say and do, often assuming they are being recorded.

It is important to remember that social media is on every minute of every day and must be monitored as much as an agency's personnel make-up allows. There should be a designated officer, or team, in charge of social media across all platforms to ensure the message and tone used remains consistent. The personnel assigned that task need to be trained regularly to keep abreast of this constantly changing environment.

Social media has given law enforcement and their communities a newfound way to easily access each other. Law enforcement and their community members can communicate in real

time about incidents and events. This has proven to be valuable during critical incidents and on a daily basis.

Once personnel are in place, leaders must utilize the unique abilities of social media to connect with their community. Community policing can be manpower-intensive and present conflicts for the agency and the community members that would like to attend. Moving those meetings to social media makes them far more accessible for citizens and easier to facilitate for the agency. It even allows those within the community that are hesitant to speak to law enforcement to attend the meeting anonymously so that they can convey their message without fear of judgement or reprisal. Social media is also a wonderful way to promote public programs, such as self-defense classes, senior citizen lunches, juvenile activities, etc. It can be used to make timely notifications related to road closures, special events and weather emergencies. When personnel go above and beyond during their duties, those feats can be displayed on social media as well. It will not only enhance their pride of being a member of the agency, it will also send a positive message to the community, bolstering their confidence in their local law enforcement. Social media is also an excellent way to distribute information and photographs of missing or endangered children and adults. Social media is used daily to solve various crimes, from theft to rape. A competent presence can even help with recruitment to attract and interact with people seeking to join the agency. There have also been cold cases solved by using social media to distribute information and photographs to millions at once. Solving these cases has given hundreds of families the justice and closure they have longed for, in some cases, for decades. Finally, social media is not a one-way form of communication. Law enforcement can also use it to have open conversations with community members, creating relationships that lead to trust, which should be the goal of every agency.

A shining example of community policing incorporating social media to achieve buy-in from citizens is the Sarasota County Sheriff's Office in Florida. In explaining their Rightful Policing Initiative, Perez (2017) said,

> In its simplest form, "Rightful Policing" means that citizens care more about their interaction with law enforcement than they do the outcome of it. A deputy can write a speeding ticket for $150, which isn't a good day for anyone. But if the deputy treats the driver with respect and empathy, and uses the opportunity to educate, the driver will value that interaction. On the flip side, if the Deputy is unpleasant, rushed and insincere, well – we know how that ends up. If you search #rightfulpolicing on Twitter, you will see that we essentially own the hashtag as part of our brand (para. 20).

Flames from the Inside

Despite the precautionary measure leaders take and training they provide, there will be personnel that light themselves, and the agency, on fire. There are numerous stories of enforcement personnel that have chosen precarious job titles for their social media profiles, such as Human Waste Disposal and Judge, Jury and Executioner, etc. There are countless others that post and share photos and comments that many others find offensive. Officers must be reminded that they are public servants and things they say, and post, can be used as material to show their character while sitting on the stand. This is becoming more and more common. If they doubt anyone is watching, they should be directed to https://www.plainviewproject.org/data (Plain View Project, n.d.). It is a social media site that catalogues social media posts by law enforcement personnel which they deem to be offensive. A good rule of thumb that many agencies use is, if your grandmother would be offended, do not post it for all to see.

Flames from the Outside

Agencies do not have to light themselves on fire to get burned. There are countless others that happily do it for us. All mainstream media outlets post their most inflammatory stories on

social media. Those stories entice people to click and share the stories. They also post opinion pieces disguised as news. Most do not bother differentiating between news and opinion and it can be difficult to do in today's world. Media outlets are for profit businesses and sensational headlines gain more clicks, which leads to more views, which lead to more profit. All too often, they jump at opportunities to show law enforcement in a bad light, even when the targeted officer(s) or agency has not violated the law or anyone's rights. Some media outlets, such as the New York Times, would even have you believe law enforcement is completely out of control and using more force than ever before with absolutely no regard for the law or people they are sworn to protect (Bosman & Hubler, 2020).

A glaring example of what has become more and more common is the public response to the recent death of George Floyd. Nationwide protests have been organized on social media that are a powerful example of this medium being used by people to organize and assemble peaceably, which is guaranteed by the United States Constitution. However, social media is also being used by political and hate groups to organize violent and destructive riots, giving out such detailed information as to when to assemble, where, what clothing to have on and where to find pre-stashed weapons, including pallets of bricks, to be used during the violence. The result has been over 700 officers injured and 13 line of duty deaths, hundreds of buildings destroyed or burned to the ground, hundreds of people displaced from their homes and hundreds of businesses looted and devastated in 30 days of chaos (Bowden, 2020). Additionally, over 150 officers have filed for on-duty disability benefits because of the protests in Minneapolis, Minnesota alone, leaving an already hurting city even less able to defend itself against the crush of destruction brought down on them by organized social media attacks, an enormous surge in violent crime and a city council actively working to dismantle the Department (Press, 2020).

Then there are the wannabe armchair detectives that are rabid to weigh in on social media. Reports submitted by this segment of society leads to countless hours of police work being done following up on disreputable tips. In some cases, the information provided can even lead to a short jail stay for someone wrongly reported. Social media is also trolled by people that are looking to make law enforcement officers look bad by luring them into precarious situations in an attempt to get them to say or do something inappropriate while someone else records the incident. Often it is too late when the officer realizes he has been baited into a mistake that could very well end their career. Trial by social media is also a concern for law enforcement (Johnston & Keyzer, 2013). Social media activity has even hampered the right to a fair trial for some when photos of the alleged criminal is distributed before an indictment is attained. It can also hamper prosecutorial efforts, even cause a mistrial, when a juror carelessly shares their thoughts about a case online (Matyszczyk, 2015). Social media is even further used as a weapon against the friends and families of victims of crime, exposing them to secondary victimization.

Finally, there have even been books written as a guide for people to follow when they record police interactions and how to handle what they deem to be inappropriate actions taken by law enforcement. In one such book, Toch (2012) says, "The involvement of spectators in police-citizen confrontations invites comparison with the role played by the chorus in classic Greek tragedies. The chorus asked questions of the actors, gave unsolicited advice (which was frequently ignored) and provided support to protagonists by supplying vividly partisan testimony. Through harsh and grating songs, it advertised and amplified the action, converting private encounters into public conflicts." (p. 4) This book, written by a world-renowned psychologist, unapologetically promotes interference in police duties during the incident and posting of the encounter on social media afterward to create conflict.

Water on the Flames

All is not lost, however. Social media also has many positive effects on officers. In many

ways, social media has made some aspects of fighting crime easier. Our agencies use it to locate

wanted persons, get the public's help in searching for missing persons, solve cold cases, measure

the mood of the community, and more. We find that social media is also an efficient way to

inform the public about things such as closed roads, information on a police action that required

a lost of resources in an area, crime prevention tips, community programs run by the agency and

reminders to stay safe on holiday weekends. Administrations also use social media to assist with

background checks on applicants. More profoundly, we see social media being used to show

support for law enforcement regularly as well. There are numerous social media sites that show

the positive side of law enforcement, sharing stories that most do not see, such as officers going

out of their way to help someone or an officer buying a booster seat for a child after a traffic stop

because the mother was struggling and could not afford one. Stories like these go a long way in

humanizing the officer behind the badge to show that officers are more than their uniform. An

excellent example is a recent story posted on the Facebook page of WDSU News,

https://www.facebook.com/77990746986/posts/10157116737941987/ which shows an officer

saving the life of a choking toddler in front of a frantic mother (WDSU News, 2020).

Role of Leadership in Putting Out the Fire

There seems to be countless ways others can do law enforcement harm via social media.

Any agency can quickly find itself embroiled in controversy at any time. Law enforcement

leaders must surround themselves with the best personnel they can. They must be part of an

organization with a culture of excellence, as was previously mentioned. It is imperative to

understand that all crises are volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – VUCA (Ellis &

Javidi, 2016). Even with taking all of the right steps prior to a chaotic situation, law enforcement leaders will still have to actively deal with the circumstances in front of them. As Dugan (2017) said, "Effective leaders are compelled to continually improvise, innovate, and adapt to ever-changing circumstances, deliberately. The most successful leaders can both anticipate a change and promptly deal with it. Developing these types of leaders then becomes an imperative for law enforcement organizations locally, regionally, and nationally." If an agency develops leaders that lead from the front, truly care about their personnel and act deliberately in the best interest of their community and agency, the chaos can be overcome. Credible leaders will have an easier time than others achieving the teamwork needed to achieve that positive outcome. As Long asserted (2017), "We also know that credible leadership can stimulate external performance by when the going gets tough the tough get going. In other words, it propels the unit toward goal achievement." The value of a credible leader during a crisis is immeasurable. It will not be easy, of course, but a positive outcome will happen with conviction and teamwork. Leaders must do the work now, so that they are well-prepared to handle the inevitable headaches.

Conclusion

Today's law enforcement leaders face extreme pressure from all directions while trying to maintain order and keep people safe. Social media presents even more challenges for the already overtaxed leader. However, there is no problem that cannot be conquered or reduced by an organization that is properly built to handle change and leaders adept at leading personnel through those changes. We live in chaotic times, with new fires popping up every day it seems. It is important for leaders in law enforcement to be able to adapt, multi-task, show empathy, be a good communicator, lead from the front and invest time in each of their personnel, all while

ensuring they are taking care to keep a solid work-life balance to stay sane. While that sounds

impossible, with the right mentor and co-workers, it can be achieved or accomplished.

References

Anderson, M., & Smith, A. (2018, March 1). *Social media use 2018: Demographics and statistics*. Retrieved from, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/.

Bosman, J., & Hubler, S. (2020, June 5). *A crisis that began with an image of police violence keeps providing more*. Retrieved from, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/us/police-violence-george-floyd.html.

Bowden, E. (2020, June 08). *More than 700 officers injured in George Floyd protests across US*. Retrieved from, https://nypost.com/2020/06/08/more-than-700-officers-injured-in-george-floyd-protests-across-us/.

Cohn, R., & Liao, A. (2016, November 16). *Mapping reveals rising use of social media monitoring tools by cities nationwide*. Retrieved from, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/mapping-reveals-rising-use-social-media-monitoring-tools-cities.

Dugan, K. (2017). *Adaptive decision making as a deliberate counter VUCA tactic.* Week 7-8. Module 5. National Command and Staff College.

Ellis, B., & Javidi, M. (2016, September 15). *Capturing the moment: Counter-VUCA leadership for 21st century policing*. Retrieved from, https://www.lawenforcementtoday.com/capturing-the-moment-counter-vuca-leadership-for-21st-century-policing/.

Flock, E. (2012, March 22). *Trayvon Martin 'Million Hoodie March': A short history of the hoodie*. Retrieved from, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/blogpost/post/trayvon-martin-million-hoodie-march-a-short-history-of-the-hoodie/2012/03/22/gIQAeGCnTS_blog.html.

Johnston, J., & Keyzer, P. (2020, July 10). *Trial by social media: Why we need to properly educate juries*. Retrieved from, https://theconversation.com/trial-by-social-media-why-we-need-to-properly-educate-juries-13547.

Lemon, J. (2018, June 20). *Antifa shares names and photos of 1,600 ICE employees*. Retrieved from, https://www.newsweek.com/antifa-shares-names-photos-1600-ice-employees-987454.

Long, L. (2017). *Leadership in practice: Credible leadership*. Week 5-6. Module 5. National Command and Staff College.

Matsa, K. & Shearer, E. (2016, May 25). *About 6-in-10 Americans get news from social media.*. Retrieved from, https://www.journalism.org/2016/05/26/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2016/pj_2016-05-26_social-media-and-news_0-01/.

Matyszczyk, C. (2015, November 5). *Juror fined for Facebook posts about criminal court case*. Retrieved from, https://www.cnet.com/news/juror-fined-for-describing-case-on-facebook/.

Perez, K. (2017, June 30). *Social media has become a critical part of law enforcement*. Retrieved from, https://www.policefoundation.org/social-media-has-become-a-critical-part-of-law-enforcement/.

Plain View Project. (n.d.). Plainviewproject.Org. Retrieved from, https://www.plainviewproject.org/data.

Press, A. (2020, July 10). *Over 150 Minneapolis officers file disability claims after death of George Floyd*. Retrieved from, https://nypost.com/2020/07/10/over-150-minneapolis-police-officers-file-disability-claims/.

Rhodan, M. (2017, August 30). *Hurricane Harvey: The U.S.'s first social media storm*. Retrieved from, https://time.com/4921961/hurricane-harvey-twitter-facebook-social-media/.

Rowinski, D. (2010, January 12). *Police fight cellphone recordings*. Retrieved from, https://boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/01/12/police_fight_cellphone_r ecordings/.

Scott, W. (2017). *It's our ship*. Week 3-4. Module 4. National Command and Staff College.

Sloly, P. (2013, May). *Social media and tactical considerations for law enforcement*. Retrieved from, https://www.nationalpublicsafetypartnership.org/clearinghouse/Content/ResourceDocumen ts/Social%20Media%20and%20Tactical%20Considerations%20For%20Law%20Enforcem ent.pdf.

Therwanger, E. (2017). *Think great*. Week 1-2. Module 6. National Command and Staff College.

Toch, H. (1988). *Cop watch: Spectators, social media, and police reform*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

United States Census Bureau (2019, July 1). *Quick facts*. Retrieved from, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219.