

**Social Media: Friend or Foe?**

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### Abstract

As law enforcement officers it is imperative we improve our understanding concerning the attitudes of the community towards Law Enforcement regarding the usage of social media and the context therein with references to: 1) How social media affects the relationship between law enforcement officers and the public, 2) How law enforcement officers can personally be affected by social media, 3) The effects of social media posting one sided stories about law enforcement officers, 4) How social media can impact law enforcement recruiting efforts and 5) How law enforcement officers can use social media to benefit their agencies. The focus of this research is to define the symptoms, the problems and the underlying causes of the constant influx of social media interactions with the focus on the community's perceptions of law enforcement officers, in positive and negative situations. How does social media affect the morale within the law enforcement agency and how does this build or diminish the relationship with the community and the nation? Finally, who do we hold responsible?

### **Social Media: Friend or Foe?**

Law enforcement professionals are experiencing a polarized atmosphere in social media interactions. As we analyze social media's impact on law enforcement and the community, we will address both the positive and negative polarizing effects social media has on officer well-being, morale, recruitment, and how law enforcement agencies are using social media to their advantage. It is up to the law enforcement organizations to understand how social media impacts us as officers, individuals, organizations, and how we can improve our relationship with the community. The purpose of this study is to enlighten our understanding concerning the attitudes of the community towards law enforcement regarding the usage of social media and the context therein with references to 1) How social media affects the relationship between law enforcement officers and the public, 2) How law enforcement officers can personally be affected by social media, 3) The effects of social media posting one sided stories about law enforcement officers, 4) How social media can impact law enforcement recruiting efforts and 5) How law enforcement officers can use social media to benefit their agencies.

#### **Law Enforcement and the Community**

According to Bain, Robinson, and Conser (2014), "A failure to interact with the community through social media appropriately or adequately leads the community to conclude that they will only ever have contact with the police in two ways: 1) following their involvement with crime, either as an offender, victim, or witness; or/and 2) through their consumption of social media," (p. 10). Snively (2016) wrote, "Importantly, Schulenburg and Cheiner (2013) found that media de-contextualization of people and events, coupled with episodic coverage, creates intentional conflict to influence public perception and increase viewership," (p. 10). This

also creates a sense of desensitizing the public view of law enforcement authority and community relations. Thus, the community, through social media posting, may develop a callous emotion towards law enforcement and disregard the professionalism and compassionate side of the officers.

Constraints do not exist for social media postings. Some would say, “It’s my first amendment rights to post and be entitled to my free speech.” Anyone can post anything online with little fear of repercussion. The anonymous online environment can encourage inflammatory and shocking behaviors. The police officer’s role is often ambiguous to the public (Waters, 2012). Yet, if left unchecked, from our experience as law enforcement officers, public opinion will believe that “If it’s on the internet – it must be true.” According to Waters (2012), “The nature of social media and law enforcement makes their relationship particularly volatile. Few significant issues have been noted; however, the potential exists for police to be impacted by attacks on their credibility or through ‘cop baiting,’” (p. 4). Waters (2012) goes on to state, “Even erroneous information can reach a significant audience, to include potential jurors and internal affairs investigators, possibly causing irreparable damage to officers’ reputations,” and “Cop baiting could become so common that officers may not know whether they are facing a situation that is legitimate, staged, or exaggerated for someone else’s benefit,” (p. 4).

As law enforcement officers, how do we get beyond the falsities of some social media posts and educate the community on the humanity of policing? According to Normore (2019), some of the basic characteristics of authentic leaders in law enforcement officers include; being passionate about their mission and not compromising their values, but rather use those situations to strengthen their values. Take this as an opportunity to educate the community on the humanity and compassionate side of your profession. Do not take on the mindset of the “us against them”

concept. But rather, be a leader through constant interaction with the community by using community policing and social media postings. As Nash (2019) says, law enforcement officers, we are to “bring peace out of disorder” and “bring harmony out of dis-harmony.”

Dr. Martin Luther King (1963) stated, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” We, as law enforcement officers, must acknowledge and humble ourselves that with great power comes greater responsibilities. Therefore, we must take every opportunity to educate the public on social media postings, facts versus fiction.

### **How Social Media Personally Affects Law Enforcement**

Social media does not just impact law enforcement agencies, but also the law enforcement officers themselves. It is easy for members of the public to forget that law enforcement officers are more than the “badge.” They are people. They have families and personal lives. The law enforcement officer is not just a cop, but a mother, father, son, or daughter. He or she has feelings and complex emotions just like anyone else.

People seem to forget the human part of the public servant when they use social media to personally attack or embarrass a particular law enforcement officer. The idea that officers are robotic and without emotion needs to be eradicated. These personal attacks can be detrimental to the mental health of a law enforcement officer. Even worse, the regular use of social media by an officer on a personal level in which he or she is comparing his/her everyday life to those on social media can be a contributing factor to a person’s decision to commit suicide. This is especially true for the newer generation of law enforcement officers, who generally fall in the Millennial age generation and the upcoming Generation Z. These young adults grew up with social media being a major part of their childhood. When interviewed by Neighmond (2019),

clinical child psychologist Mary Fristad stated her patients, who range from childhood to college age adults are concerned with “not about how much fun they look forward to having over the weekend, but about what event can they post on Snapchat so that other people will know they have friends,” (p. 3). Dr. Fristad goes on to tell Neighmond that a focus group of college students revealed social media added another set of stressors to their lives, including making comparisons to their peers online (Neighmond, 2019). This is stressful enough, but adding the career of law enforcement officer to a young adult’s life and that individual continuously being exposed to negative comments about his or her career adds an even greater stressor. This can begin to negatively impact the officer, leading to depression and thoughts or acts of suicide.

Suicide is not the only way social media can have an effect on law enforcement. Many officers fear for the safety of themselves, their families, and their careers. When a high profile use of force case is spread throughout all media platforms, the negative comments on social media against all law enforcement officers seem to be thrust into the forefront. All officers suffer from the backlash caused by the barrage of adverse comments. However, the most destruction is caused when the comments and media stories single out a particular law enforcement officer, posting where the officer lives or a picture of his or her family as a scare tactic. This does not strictly apply to high profile cases. With the availability of the internet to everyone with a cell phone, an officer’s personal information, such as his or her address, personal social media profile, and family members’ names could easily be posted by someone who just received a traffic ticket or misdemeanor summons from that officer (Waters, 2012). These actions can make a law enforcement officer feel vulnerable to attacks from the public, fear for the safety of their families, or even cause him or her to re-evaluate a career in law enforcement. No matter if the intent of the social media posts, comments, or stories are to cause harm to a law enforcement

officer or not, these negative impacts can lead to bigger issues, such as family arguments, divorce, depression, and even suicide. When a negative story about a law enforcement officer is spread throughout social media, it can also take its toll on his or her career. Waters (2012) states, “Personal credibility is essential for law enforcement. Through social media, people easily can attack a police officer’s character. If an officer’s integrity is compromised, courtroom testimony and investigations are at risk. Law enforcement officers can find their honor under serious attack online at any time,” (p.4).

Not all social media affects law enforcement officers in a negative manner. There are also many platforms in which members of the officer’s community leave comments regarding their positive interactions with him or her. This is usually posted by the public onto the law enforcement agency’s social media platform. The individual officer is often made aware of the positive story or comment by his or her family or fellow officers. One of the trends in some Peace Officer Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.) Academies is to have someone designated to check the Officer Down Memorial Page online or on Facebook every morning during an academy session. This is not to depress the cadets attending the P.O.S.T. Academy, but it is a daily reminder of what they are working towards and to honor and remember those that served before them. This is an innovative way to use social media to motivate the next generation of law enforcement officers to continue the legacy of those that came before them.

So what can law enforcement officers do to address social media personally affecting them? One answer is for law enforcement agencies to teach their officers about being credible leaders and maintaining the values which make up a credible leader. One of these is courage. According to Normore et al., (2014) an officer with courage is described as someone who “is willing to persevere in the face of fear, danger and difficulty; is courageous in the face of

physical pain, hardship, intimidation, death, or threat of death; is morally on higher-ground; is willing to act rightly in the face of popular opposition, shame, scandal, or discouragement,” (p. 53). Learning to become a credible leader builds confidence, courage, and trust in the officer, which gives him or her the tools necessary to mentally be able to handle the personal affects they begin to feel from social media use and exposure.

### **Effects of One-Sided Social Media Posts on Law Enforcement**

Postings and topics on social media that drive a negative narrative on law enforcement will cause wide-spread negative sentiment. Localized stories and reactions on police incidents that generate negative public sentiment will now garner widespread attention because of the instantaneity of social media. Social media has become a tool to garner attention and notoriety for those who may not have had a voice on a national stage.

According to a study conducted by the Urban Institute (Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, and Kim, 2019), an analysis of over 64,000,000 tweets on Twitter using keywords involving police determined that about 2% of tweets referencing police were in a positive manner. In this study, negative tweets on law enforcement were around 19.3%. Historically, the positive tweets stayed steady at around 2%, but the negative interactions would increase by up to 5 percentage points nationally when situations such as the death of Freddie Gray would happen. This study compared data from January 12 through June 12 of the years 2014 and 2015. This is approximately 150 days surrounding the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore in 2015.

This data explains how a police incident in an isolated area can affect the perception of law enforcement across the country. This uncontrolled negative sentiment, if left unchecked, without accurate information it will shape public discourse and further feed into the negative views of law enforcement. It is incumbent upon leaders with the law enforcement profession to



have an understanding that building community trust will help decrease the buildup of negative sentiment toward police at large. Agency leaders that are open, honest, and caring through their deeds and policies will reflect their agency's mission and values. Having a community meeting when a police incident gathers national attention to clearly communicate your agency's policies, values, and mission will demonstrate your agency's leadership role for the community.

This information on social media is a vital tool from which all law enforcement agencies can benefit. Agencies should have dedicated personnel to monitor sentiment and develop community engagement activities. Social media postings may not fully reflect the accurate attitudes of the community regarding their police agency. Agencies that nurture and develop strong bonds with their communities in conjunction with social media monitoring will develop trust and respect from those they serve. This interaction and collaboration with the community is important because as stated by Oglesby-Neal, Tiry, and Kim (2019), "The instantaneity and accessibility of social media may help drive the ability of public sentiment to change quickly," (p. 8).

Law enforcement is an inherently stressful occupation and a number of officers are spending time on social media. Officers may spend their off time looking at postings and comments for personal amusement and other officers may be using social media as an investigatory tool. As the data has shown there are approximately 17% more negative than positive postings regarding police on Twitter nationally. When a critical incident happens with one law enforcement agency it will send ripples across social media that has an effect on all local and state law enforcement agencies. This steady flow of negative comments can add to the built up stress that is already affecting officers. This will lead to some officers feeling

underappreciated and indifferent toward their duties. If this attitude is left unattended it can lead to a negative culture traveling throughout the agency.

Leaders that use the benefits of servant leadership will use a genuine inclination of servitude to help these younger officers deal with the added stress of social media. Servant leaders that truly listen to the officers will have the awareness to realize that negative postings will have an adverse effect on their well-being. This will aid in building a professional culture with their subordinates by listening, interacting and instilling teamwork with the group. We need to encourage the formation of groups selected from respected members of the agency that will form action plans that will help guide officers through the negative trappings of social media. Members of these groups should be respected members of different sections, generations, and ranks from the agency. This will be a diverse group that represents all members of the agency. This will create a sense of ownership that encourages an atmosphere of innovation, creativity and care for all aspects of the job. We need to realize that different generations will have different perspectives on the differing social media platforms. This group will use these tools to create a thoughtful and sincere action plan that has the best interests of agency personnel in mind.

With clear communication, credible leaders will use the action plan submitted by this group to enhance the professional culture within the agency's organizational sub-systems. With the realization that culture travels laterally first, we will encourage this group to look inwards first. Self-reflection is important to leading this culture change. Credible leaders that have cultivated trust and earned expertise will be able to successfully lead the culture change throughout the organization. Using the internalization strategy, the credible leader will be able to integrate the personal goals with work goals of their personnel. This tactic of collaboration will institute long-term goals that will have a positive impact of culture change. The use of a working

group of respected peers throughout the agency will help fend off the fear of the unknown when these changes are being implemented. The collaboration of the group will increase the “buy-in” from members of the agency that were not directly involved in the process. Creating consistency and security throughout this culture will help with the external stressors, such as negative social media postings, that affect law enforcement officers (Wooten, 2019). By aligning our officer’s work, goals, and purpose we will create a positive culture throughout the agency and throughout every section. This will create an atmosphere where our officers’ know that we have their well-being as a primary concern.

Agencies that follow this guideline in their approach to any difficult situation their officers are facing will give their agency a positive leadership cultivating culture. As Abrashoff (2008) said, it is important to “embed leadership development in your culture” (p. 37). Creating this culture change is not something that will happen immediately nor will you reap the rewards of these efforts quickly. Instead it needs to be a part of the agency’s lifeblood. Once you give officers responsibility, inspiration, input, and feedback as the accepted norm, it will set a culture where innovation and leadership will thrive. Most of the officers want to have more responsibility, and this will in turn create a sense of ownership that will become infectious.

### **Social Media Effects on Recruiting Efforts**

Recruiting applicants is an important function within a police department. Every division within the agency can be affected by the success or failure of the agency’s recruiting program. For many years, law enforcement agencies did not have to worry about recruiting because a significant amount of people wanted to have a career in law enforcement. Today, law enforcement agencies have to focus more on recruitment to hire qualified people and retain them in order to provide the best service to their community. The internet was reported to be a

powerful tool in influencing recruits and potential applicants to apply to a given agency (Castaneda & Ridgeway, 2010).

One obstacle that law enforcement is currently dealing with in today's society is social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube are some of the sites being utilized by the public today. These social media sites allow citizens to instantly post comments, pictures, and/or videos of law enforcement officers. There is virtually no way to regulate what is being posted, whether it is true or not, so the negative impacts can be very damaging to an agency's reputation and credibility. Most cell phones today have a camera and access to the internet. This allows anyone the opportunity to immediately take a picture or video of a law enforcement officer, upload it to a social media site, and caption it with a negative comment. That one picture or video could then be seen by thousands of people around the world, including potential recruits, and instantly cast a law enforcement agency and the officer into a negative light. The law enforcement officer could instantly become publicly ridiculed, without ever getting to defend him or herself or tell his or her side of the story. This can all happen within a few minutes and without the officer's immediate knowledge. This is the power of social media. This type of negative social media attention can greatly affect a person's interest in becoming a law enforcement officer.

To overcome negative social media attacks and still be able to attract good applicants, law enforcement agencies must be proactive and engaging on social media. By engaging in social media, agencies can interact with the citizens, improve their image, disperse information, and entice people to have a career in law enforcement. Agencies suggest that sharing pictures and videos via social media outlets (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) is an effective way to inform the public (Erickson, 2012). But it also shows law enforcement officers

as human beings, shines a positive light on the agency, and can boost someone's ambitions to join the police department.

Engaging in social media also targets the Millennial generation of law enforcement applicants. The Millennial generation already uses social media sites every day. Due to Millennials being extremely involved with the internet and social media, law enforcement agencies must be able to adapt from traditional recruiting methods (i.e. newspapers, job fairs, etc.) to engaging on the internet and social media in order to attract more recruits.

A law enforcement agency's social media recruitment program will only be successful if the right person is running it. Leaders within a law enforcement agency should select someone that is very proficient and knowledgeable with social media to run the agency's social media platform. An agency's successful use of social media is dependent on having the right person utilizing the full potential of social media to reach the agency's target audience in order to attract the best applicants as well as the younger generations.

Law enforcement recruiting via social media is becoming today's norm and will not be going away anytime soon. To be effective in their recruitment strategies, police departments need to utilize social media applications to be competitive and attract the best recruits (Jensen III & Graves, 2013). Law enforcement agencies need to be able to combat negative attacks on social media if they want to attract, recruit, and retain the best qualified applicants.

### **Using Social Media to Benefit Law Enforcement**

In recent years, social media has become significant and beneficial in the law enforcement community. More and more agencies are using social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to identify wanted subjects, distribute vital announcements and to keep the public informed of general information regarding their agencies.

The use of social media platforms is very useful in the identification and apprehension of wanted persons. It has been shown that criminals often inadvertently implicate themselves in criminal activities using social media (Byers, 2017). When investigators use these resources it greatly enhances their ability to solve crimes within their community. Law enforcement agencies regularly post pictures of wanted people to the varying social media platforms, which often times leads to the identification and arrest of wanted people. For example: If there have been a rash of vehicle burglaries in a particular area that may have been caught on surveillance camera, law enforcement can post the images to social media platforms to in an effort to identify the suspect(s) involved. Officers assigned to investigations can also look at profiles and the comments under those profiles to potentially identify witnesses and persons of interest in criminal activities.

Another advantage that can be gained by using social media is the ability to track where missing persons may be going or to find distressed persons (Roufa, 2019). When law enforcement officers can view posts related to missing persons they can track possible locations of where they may be going and who may be involved. Being able to use social media in this manner may decrease the time missing persons can be found and reduce potential future harm to them.

Social media platforms are also a useful tool during times of crisis and can be used to quickly get information to the public about major events within a community. In August of 2016 there was a devastating flood that affected several parishes in Louisiana. During the flood most roads and homes were flooded and the ability to communicate through traditional news outlets was nearly nonexistent. The agencies involved in rescue efforts were able to use the various social media platforms to keep the community informed of the rescue efforts and

locations of shelters for those who were affected. The responses from the community also provided information on where rescue efforts needed to be focused. The use of social media was crucial in the service to the community during this critical event.

People within a community need to be aware of what their law enforcement agency is doing to serve them and how they can serve their agency. Using social media platforms, law enforcement agencies can post operational statistics to show exactly what crimes are occurring within their area. Agencies can also use the various social media platforms to spotlight officers who go above and beyond in their duties. In today's society, law enforcement has been scrutinized heavily by the media, often shedding a negative attitude towards law enforcement. With the use of social media, the news media outlets have a broader reach to younger generations that are highly influenced by social media. The media today seems to focus heavily on the negatives in law enforcement, rarely giving much attention to the positives. By using social media, agencies can share more of the "good" in law enforcement. There are many times that law enforcement officers go above and beyond the call of duty within the community but are rarely recognized by the media for the good that they do, which leads to a more negative view among the community. It is very important that law enforcement agencies use these social media platforms to share the good that is done in the community which will help create a positive culture within the community and the agency.

Most civilians seem to be ignorant of the daily operations of the law enforcement agency that serves them. For instance, people who are stopped for speeding often criticize an officer for stopping them for speeding when they could "be out catching real criminals". Law enforcement agencies can and should use social media platforms to better educate civilians on why agencies perform certain duties. Most civilians do not know that there are many different divisions within

an agency that are dedicated to accomplishing certain goals. For example, most traffic divisions are dedicated to safety enforcement on roadways and highways, while uniform patrol are dedicated to calls for service and general patrol of the communities. If law enforcement agencies make the effort to use social media and reach out to educate the community on the operations of that agency, they would build a better relationship with the community.

With the advancement of new technologies, they become less costly and more available to more people around the world. These technologies are allowing for instant communication and sharing worldwide, and law enforcement agencies need to be aware of them. With newer and more technologically proficient generations becoming adults, law enforcement will have to stay ahead of the technological curve to keep from falling behind. Social media platforms will be the future when it comes to reaching out to these newer generations.

### **Conclusion**

Developing a diverse action group to combat anxieties and stress that officers' face with negative sentimental social media will develop a feeling of appreciation and belonging within the ranks. Social media has the ability to negatively affect the morale of law enforcement officers and create a hostile relationship with the community when left unchecked. Research has shown that a negative police interaction will have ripple effects that travel across police agencies nationwide. It is incumbent for adaptive police leaders to anticipate these affects and proactively influence the outcome. Adaptive Leadership will guide us to initiate diverse action groups with the goal of minimizing the effects of stress related to constant negative social media attention on law enforcement. These leaders will use proactive communications to build trust and credibility with the community by initiating contact with community leaders. Having clear, effective communication in community meetings with a unified message from police leaders will nurture



the trust and respect that has been earned with the community. It is the responsibility of law enforcement to change the culture in which social media impacts morale and community relations by using Adaptive Leadership to use proactively communicate with the citizens, Servant Leadership to listen and care for officers' well-being, and Credible Leadership's respect and trust to create a culture of ownership and innovation for the future of law enforcement. Leaders using the core values of loyalty, kindness, and honesty as described by Normore, et al. (2014) will "promote positive organizational thought and growth," (p. 46). This will create a sense of loyalty and ownership amongst the officers that will help with productivity, morale, officer retention, and community trust for the agency.

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