

**Social Media and its Impact on Law Enforcement**

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### **Abstract**

The advent of social media has undoubtedly revolutionized modern communication. Social media platforms facilitate increased frequency of communication between individuals, as well as allowing a single individual to communicate their message to an unlimited audience instantly. This presents a unique challenge to law enforcement professionals not encountered by previous generations. This unique challenge presented by social media has had a significant impact on law enforcement. We will examine social media's impact on law enforcement by looking at two key factors which we argue have the most significant impact on law enforcement. To begin, we will identify how social media highlights the generational differences present within the law enforcement profession. Today's law enforcement profession is comprised primarily of three generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. As noted in the research, despite these generational differences, the vast majority of Americans utilize social media to communicate. Using the knowledge gained by examining the generational differences, we will then examine the relationship between communication and law enforcement's use of social media. Effective communication is vital to organizational success. Furthermore, understanding that social media is essentially a form of communication, law enforcement must utilize effective communication principles, proactive communication, and conflict management strategies in order to minimize the challenges presented by social media and maximize the benefits of instantaneous and prolific communication provided by social media.

## **Social Media and its Impact on Law Enforcement**

Modern law enforcement as a profession has faced many challenges since its inception in the early 1800s when modern police practices were first employed as a means of promoting public safety. Over the years, public safety as a profession has continuously evolved in order to confront relevant challenges. Just as previous generations of public safety professionals adapted to the ever-changing and unique circumstances of their time, today's law enforcement officer is faced with a unique challenge. The technological advances made in the twenty-first century have significantly affected law enforcement as a profession. More specifically, the technological advances in computer systems and the advent of social media platforms have revolutionized communication. A closer examination of the use of various social media platforms reveals its impact as both a unique challenge and as an unprecedented opportunity for law enforcement.

### **Social Media and its Impact of Law Enforcement-Generations**

The use of social media spans most of the generations represented in today's society. Those generations include the Baby Boomer Generation, Generation X, and Millennials. The Baby Boomer generation is comprised of those who were born between 1925 and 1945. This generation is characterized by loyalty, resourcefulness, and a strong work ethic that placed work at the forefront of one's life. Interpersonal relationships are highly valued, as they did not grow up with technology dominating their life. Though the Baby Boomer generation proficiently utilizes technology in the workplace, the primary distinction between their generation and successive generations is their view of technology. For the Baby Boomer, technology is understood as a productivity tool rather than connectivity. The Baby Boomer generation gave way to Generation X beginning in 1965 lasting until 1980. Generation X is characterized by

independence and the desire for a balance between work and personal life. As members of Generation X grew up, advancements in technology made it an increasingly integral part of everyday life (Ryback, 2016). The third generation, commonly referred to as Millennials, is comprised of individuals born between 1980 and 1994. Millennials are characteristically ambitious, confident, and commonly have high expectations of those they work for. Millennials, unlike previous generations, view technology as an integral part of life with a strong emphasis on using technology to connect with others. Though the degree to which each generation uses social media varies, recent research indicates that all three generations make up the landscape of today's social media users.

Though the degree of social media usage varies from one generation to another, it remains relevant that all generations utilize social media as it has resulted in both a positive and negative impact on law enforcement. To understand this, one can look at the type of social media used by each generation represented in this study. The Pew Research Center (2018) found that Facebook and YouTube dominate the social media landscape, as notable majorities of adults in the United States report using each of these sites. At the same time, younger Americans, particularly those aged eighteen years to twenty four years, stand out for embracing a variety of social media platforms and the frequency with which they use them. The research further reveals that approximately seventy eight percent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four use Snapchat, while of those users, seventy one percent revisit the social media site several times per day. Similarly, seventy-one percent of Americans in this age group use Instagram, and forty-five percent use Twitter. Nonetheless, Facebook remains the primary social media platform used by American adults as roughly two-thirds of adults in the United States report being Facebook users

with approximately three-quarters of those report accessing Facebook on a daily basis (Pew Research Center, 2018).

### **Social Media as a tool for Law Enforcement**

Social Media posts and contacts provide valuable information for law enforcement. This information can be used as an investigative tool to help identify a suspect or wanted subject. A suspect's interaction with friends on social media, as well as incriminating photos and videos, can be used to solve criminal investigations. Social media is widely used as a communication tool to effectively and instantaneously disseminate announcements to a nearly unlimited audience regarding emergency situations, as well as promote upcoming community events sponsored by their agency.

Social media can also be used to evaluate the public's perception of an agency's performance. If an agency is using social media effectively, it can demonstrate the agency's commitment to transparency. Additionally, employment opportunities posted on an agency's social media platform can have a positive effect on recruitment. Social media posts that recognize members of an agency for exemplary service can showcase the positive effect law enforcement officers have on the communities they serve.

### **Social Media and Conflict Management**

Most of what Officers deal with in law enforcement relates to conflict. In the performance of their duties, officers will experience conflict in ways such as uncooperative suspects and angry citizens. There are also conflicts inside the organization often caused by irresponsible deputies, disrespectful subordinates, tensions which result from the generational gap, and conflicts with supervisors. Therefore, conflict management as it relates to both internal

and external conflict is a key component in accomplishing law enforcement's mission (Nash, 2019).

Most law enforcement related stress results from inter-organizational relationships. Public safety as a profession ranks near the top as being one of the most stressful professions. Furthermore, internal relationships within the organization remain the number one cause of stress among law enforcement professionals. Leaders that are able to effectively manage internal conflict become better able to accomplish the agency's mission, improve interaction with the public, and ultimately reduce the stress levels of its agency's members (Nash, 2019).

The prolific use of social media in today's society has prompted law enforcement agencies around the United States to create their own social media accounts. Though social media has greatly benefited law enforcement's mission as previously noted, law enforcement's use of social media has also caused many conflicts. Negative social media posts are widely disseminated through options to "share" posts and can potentially hurt an organization's reputation (Kenyon, 2019).

An incident which would serve as a wake-up occurred in Albuquerque, New Mexico when a police officer was involved in an on-duty shooting. This incident discredited the officer when reporters discovered that he had previously identified his profession as a "human waste disposal" on his Facebook profile. In several high profile cases, officers' actions have been posted on YouTube, receiving hundreds, or even thousands of negative comments from users (Hanson, 2011). Therefore, it is important to create and maintain a social media policy which ensures that social media helps to further the agency's mission.

Correct use of social media connects law enforcement agencies with the community, thus making police work easier through increased community involvement. However, it can cause harm if used incorrectly. Weighing in on current events, posting memes, or starting a hashtag campaign can easily backfire. Officers' personal use of social media can also reflect poorly on his agency. There is evidence of cases of Officers "tweeting" racist or posting inappropriate videos in uniform while on duty. These kinds of posts can damage community trust and put the organization under public scrutiny. Even if a law enforcement agency or individual officer does not post anything controversial, a response or a comment to the post can spark a fierce debate among the account holder's social media followers. A solid social media policy will guide both departmental use of social media and individual officer's use of as well.

The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP, 2019) suggests that law enforcement agencies determine the scope of social media policies before they are written in order to determine the purpose of the policy and decide specifically the areas that need to be covered. Like other policies, an agency's social media policy should clearly define terms up front to avoid confusion or disputes, including definitions such terms as blog, post, page, and profile. The policy should also clearly establish what is considered acceptable and unacceptable use of both the agency's official social media profile and officers' personal profiles.

To this end, many police organizations appoint a designated individual to manage the agency's social media profile. Some agencies even allow several different officers to post from official department accounts. In any case, an effective social media policy should clearly indicate who is authorized to represent the organization on the official agency profile as it is important to note that all posts to the official social media profile become public record. While social media policies are helpful in minimizing the harmful effects of negative social media publicity, they

will not completely solve the problem. An agency's social media policy must respect the individual officer's First Amendment right to freedom of speech. This became clear when a Court decision ruled that one agency's policy designed to restrict "negative comments" about the agency was determined to be overly broad, thus violating the officer's right to free speech. The social media policy for the organization should specify that an officer is permitted the right to freedom of expression while simultaneously outlining the exceptions which are not protected by the First Amendment. Examples of speech that are not considered protected under the First Amendment include posting or sharing sensitive departmental information, posting images of department personnel, logos, or agency insignia that include negative comments regarding work related situations. This also includes posting evidence of them misbehaving either on or off duty. Disciplinary action for such violations should be clearly outlined for violating the agency's social media policy or code of conduct. Officers should receive training regarding the agency's policy as well as remind that the agency may review their personal social media accounts at any time (Kenyon, 2019).

### **Social Media's Impact on Communication**

Freedom of the press also guaranteed under the First Amendment because media outlets are vital to a free society; however, their rules for operation often conflict with the mission of law enforcement. In other words, news media organizations are tasked with the objective of reporting sensational information that may have been leaked prior to the agency's official news release. The withholding of information from the news media is an essential function of a law enforcement agency's duty to notify the affected parties before the information being made public. While this give and take with the news media has always existed, social media adds the additional burden on law enforcement professionals due to the added sense of urgency created by



the potential for someone to use social media to share sensitive information before the necessary parties are informed. However, this remains only one aspect of the type of communication transmitted on social media.

Communication tools used by law enforcement have evolved over the years from “wanted” posters to social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Community policing today has also expanded through social media networking in order to locate missing children, alert the public of suspicious activity, and even to inform the public about crimes committed in their neighborhoods (Hanson, 2011).

The impact of social media on public safety is wide-ranging. As a result the law enforcement profession will never be the same. Even though social media has changed public safety, the concepts of effective communication remain the same and can be clearly applied to the challenges created by social media. For example, leadership remains a process of influence by which an individual motivates a group through effective communication principles in order to accomplish the mission or desired goal. Communication is central to everything that happens in the workplace. Most public safety organizations utilize the principles of a para-military chain of command, which naturally results in leaders communicating information from the top-down fashion. As noted, social media has changed the dynamic of communication, but the foundation of a public safety organization remains its leadership. Therefore, the same concepts of effective communication can be applied to social media and its impact on law enforcement. As such, credibility principles of effective communication can be applied to police incidents that have gained national exposure as a result of social media. Throughout the leadership training course, three concepts of credibility have been discussed. Those concepts include expertise, which is defined as the level at which others perceive a person or organization is able to do their job. The

concept of dynamism which depicts the degree of involvement and the leader's perceived ability to take control of emerging issues. The final concept is trust. Law enforcement agencies that are viewed as trustworthy and credible are more likely to maintain positive relationships on social media outlets and the communities they serve. Dishonesty ruins the foundation of trust necessary for effective communication (Long, 2017).

Facebook and other social media platforms are stitched into the fabric of American society. One result can be noted in the way public safety organizations recruit new employees and distribute information. Mass information cannot be distributed with the stroke of a button. Large and small public safety organizations alike have been impacted by social media when the principles of effective communication provide the best weapon to combat the negative effects of social media (Long, 2017).

### **Proactive Communication through Social Media**

As leaders in the community, social media helps law enforcement engage with the community at a level never before seen. It provides a medium for sharing innovation as it happens. Law enforcement is an ever-evolving profession with new technologies rapidly emerging. Social media allows law enforcement agencies to showcase these new technologies and innovative crime fighting tools being used to keep their community safe. Social media also helps the community familiarize themselves with its law enforcement leaders through biographical information of the agency's command staff, as well as promoting the agency's mission and vision statements. For years, law enforcement has traveled in the direction of social isolation. As the move toward community policing takes hold, the use of social media allows the community to humanize the badge. Social media also helps law enforcement leaders in the even

they come under fire for policies or decisions. In that event, an agency can opt to clarify a policy or explain a decision in an open and transparent manner utilizing social media. Agencies must be cautious not to censor negative posts, but to take the time to explain their side or even reach out to the individual responsible for the negative comments in order to address the issue.

Furthermore, if a problem is gaining traction with public sentiment, an agency must address it adequately through social media as to not let it fester (Parker, 2019).

Social media helps bring about community involvement. As law enforcement agencies roll out new community policing initiatives, the use of social media helps the public gain a voice which increases buy-in of its implementation. Social media also gives the community a platform to voice their concerns and criticisms, as well as praise both the agency and individual officers. Ultimately, this communication is a valuable and cost effective communication tool, provided it is used properly. As younger generations are entering the workplace, law enforcement leaders must recognize social media as a valuable recruitment tool for the emerging workforce. Effective use of social media as a recruitment tool should include recruitment videos that can instantly reach thousands of potential candidates (Parker, 2019).

Increased use of internet technology has resulted in the rise of social media by planners, local governments, the general public, and law enforcement. Social media has become a significant platform for consumers to voice their thoughts, whether they are praiseful or complaints. The general public has, by and large, adopted the use of social media as it provides real time information about everything from the weather and traffic to public projects and meetings. This information is distributed to the public in a promptly with limited costs (Using Social Media for Proactive Reputation Management, 2017).

Clear communication in law enforcement is crucial, especially in a crisis. Effective communication can make the difference between keeping a handle on a situation or letting it get out of control. Good crisis management requires forethought, planning, and training. Proactive communication helps coordinate efforts to resolve a situation, keep people safe, and prevent panic within the public. There are five steps that law enforcement should take in order to communicate on social media effectively. These steps include formalize key processes, be proactive, establish alternative communication protocols, regularly evaluate and update processes and integrate crisis response and communication into training (Five Tips for Law Enforcement Crisis Communication Success, 2018).

Communication should be incorporated into the policies and procedures for various situations as well as officer training. When an incident occurs, officers should understand exactly who they need to contact, when they should reach out, and what information should be relayed. Good law enforcement crisis communication should be proactive, not reactive. Department leaders should not wait until a crisis hits to formulate a communication plan. Every possible scenario cannot be anticipated, but general guidelines for potential crisis situations should be developed (Five Tips for Law Enforcement Crisis Communication Success, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

A case study published in 2016 concluded “Unlike traditional media, social media allows law enforcement agencies the opportunity to construct and distribute their own stories, effectively allowing control of-or, at a minimum, participation in-their own image. In that way, social media can be an effective method for improving community relations, to the benefit of the public and the police alike” (Snively, 2016, p.26). Social media has greatly impacted law

enforcement in several ways. The deliberate use of social media benefits law enforcement as it provides an investigative tool that allows for the development of investigative leads as well as providing agencies with the ability to promote the agency's culture, mission, and vision, while simultaneously allowing the agency to challenge inaccurate information in the cause of promoting organizational transparency (Snively, 2016).

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