

The Dynamic Relationship Between Police and Media

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Abstract

The relationship between law enforcement, their communities and the media is a significant issue facing law enforcement leaders from large and small agencies. This paper will analyze how media expectations and social media demands are impacting how American law enforcement personnel carry out their duties and mission. Specifically, we will analyze the current relationship between the media and law enforcement, discuss how that relationship has evolved and changed the manner in which law enforcement activity is reported. We examine how law enforcement has changed in response to the demands of the modern media outlets. Then, we examine the impact of the 24-hour news cycle, and how the demand for immediate information has changed the timelines and expectations for how law enforcement communicates with media outlets. Next, we discuss why it is important for law enforcement leaders to effectively communicate their narrative to the media to tell their story and positively impact media coverage. Finally, we offer ideas for maximizing the relationship between police agencies and the media.

The Dynamic Relationship Between Police and Media

This document has been the collaborative effort of five currently serving law enforcement leaders from large and small Sheriff's Offices representing agencies from 485 to 22 sworn deputies. The purpose of the work is to address the effect that media and social media have had on police relations with the general public. Ever since the inception of the 24-hour news cycle, the relationship between the two entities has at times been strained and complex. This relationship is currently of extreme significance to law enforcement as well as the people they serve.

Recently, incidents that have been covered by the media have put a negative spin on the relationship between law enforcement and citizens. The 24-hour news cycle has had an impact on police and community relations. An example is the March 3, 1991 arrest of Rodney King by the Los Angeles Police Department. Examining the news media's coverage of the arrest, the trial, and riots that followed is an example. Media coverage on television influenced the way people perceived the incident and possibly indirectly encouraged them to take part in illegal activity. According to Zelizer (2017) the Rodney King video:

Which today we would say went 'viral' -- circulated with the kind of speed that nobody had seen before. As one media critic recalled at the time of King's arrest in 1991, "the Internet was barely more than a curiosity at colleges ... Cell phones were the size of concrete bricks, and nearly as heavy. Video-sharing websites, portable telephones with cameras and digital video were still mostly dreams in science fiction stories (para. 10).

This incident is of particular interest to our efforts since social media did not exist at the time and information of the incident was obtained through mass media or word of mouth. The recent prevalence of social media on our society has directly influenced

citizen perceptions and actions of law enforcement. This has changed how law enforcement activity is reported. The Ferguson riots that were a result of the August 9, 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, by Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson, is an example of how ineffective police communication can lead to misinformation and a negative outcome. The police failed in the timely management of the incident through interactions with mass media and social media. As law enforcement leaders we have learned lessons about the release of sensitive information. We understand the importance of ensuring all official statements are properly vetted for accuracy and communicated before the media creates their own narrative.

The intense and continually recycled media coverage of the beating of Rodney King by police officers of the Los Angeles Police Department on March 3, 1991 was in large part due to the 24-hour cable news networks. The inception of the 24-hour news cycle began on June 1, 1980 with Cable News Network or CNN first going on the air 24 hours a day. Since that time, Americans have become accustomed to receiving their news through this type of organization. Before the King case was on continual media rotation, the public learned the top news stories of the day such as the Challenger disaster, the rescue of baby Jessica, and the fall of the Berlin Wall through traditional evening news (History.com Editors, 2018). CNN has changed the norm that news could only be reported at fixed times throughout the day on the evening news. At the time of CNN's launch, TV news was dominated by three major networks and their nightly 30-minute broadcasts (History.com Editors, 2018). After initially being available in about two million United States homes, today CNN is seen in more than

89 million households in the United States and over 160 million homes internationally (History.com Editors, 2018).

Today the public can get instant news through social media on a hand held device. In the Rodney King case, the public was exposed to repeat playing of the video. This action served to incite anger upon certain segments of the public towards the Los Angeles Police Department, the officers involved in the case, and law enforcement in general.

Civil unrest over the beating came to a boiling point on April 29, 1992 when a jury acquitted four police officers involved in the beating. News coverage of the verdict was heavily reported. After media coverage of the verdict riots occurred for six days. The effects of the Rodney King case will long be remembered. Law enforcement agencies completed training in officer conduct and looked into strategies in how to better manage incidents before they get out of hand.

Literature Review

Law enforcement has started using social media as a useful tool to disseminate information to manage volatile situations. According to Kim et al. (2016) “Roughly 1 in 5 law enforcement agencies reportedly started using social media as a part of their official operations in 2012” (p. 3). Social media use has grown swiftly among police departments. Law enforcement agencies across the country are using social media technology to improve community relations, gather intelligence, increase recruiting effectiveness, and shape initial narratives. A 2016 social media survey from the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) asked law enforcement agencies what they use social media technology for. In the study, 80% of law enforcement agencies use social media to notify the public of safety concerns, interact with the

community, and manage the agency's reputation (p. 4). Law enforcement agencies also use social media for other purposes. 70% of law enforcement agencies use social media for intelligence gathering, and 58% for recruitment efforts (p. 4).

Law enforcement can use social media to build relationships and create community engagement. The use of social media allows law enforcement to get information out quickly, to a large audience, and to humanize law enforcement. Listing accomplishments of their officers and promoting department-sponsored events such as national night outs can be accomplished through social media.

The way law enforcement uses social media has significantly changed in the past decade. More often than not, law enforcement is using social media to gather intelligence to assist with investigations. Law enforcement is using social media for collecting evidence, finding people, broadcasting information and soliciting tips from the public on social media (Mateescu et al., 2015). Law enforcement agencies across the country are experiencing challenges in hiring qualified applicants and are using social media for recruiting the next generation of law enforcement officers.

Millennials have become a large part of the adult population and the majority of them use social media as a news source. Law enforcement agencies can use social media as a recruiting tool to provide information on police work and describe their agency and what they can offer future employees. Millennials are looking for a fun and social place to work and law enforcement agencies can explain their perspective to applicants on what they offer.

The underlying cause of the impact of the media on public perceptions should be taken in context and not overstated. A study conducted by the National Institute of Justice

showed that only thirty-five percent of Los Angeles area residents had opinions about law enforcement that were influenced by the media, whereas sixty-five percent of residents were influenced by their personal encounters with police officers (Ashcroft & Hart, 2003). Mainstream media is generally in favor of law enforcement tactics but may be critical of police actions. According to Dowler (2003), media researchers believe police officers and the media have a mutually beneficial relationship that perpetuates the dramatization of policing effectiveness. According to Dowler (2003), media outlets rely on police leaders for information, stories, and reliable information about crime and the community, and police benefit from the media's positive portrayal of their work.

The National Institute of Justice (2003) found citizens formal and informal contacts with police, prior experience as victims of violent and property crime, their demographic characteristics, and the media all influenced their perceptions of law enforcement. Historically, police leaders have had control over the timeline to disseminate a news release to their local media outlets to describe an incident. In the event of a high profile incident, the media frequently is the force controlling the timeline and expectation for information.

Police leaders face the challenge of finding balance between the release of accurate information and timeliness. Many police administrators are inclined to make no direct statements regarding an event involving their officers. While this may be a highly defensible position from a legal, investigative, and liability standpoint, it can be extremely frustrating to officers, and may be perceived as suspicious by the community (Shultz, 2018). The Ferguson event is an example of this type of situation. Without making direct reference to an ongoing investigation, a police leader can assure the public

about the transparency of any internal review of an event. Being able to truthfully say that an objective mechanism exists to examine all complaints and concerns adds credibility to the agency. The new standard for officer-involved shootings in Wisconsin is the investigation by an outside and objective agency.

It is fair game for leaders to address media coverage including use of vocabulary, citation of sources and accuracy. If a healthy relationship exists with the local media, a meeting or memo suggesting common vocabulary or terms could be helpful.

Taking a strategy of helping the media and public better understand a controversial event is different than being defensive. Using carefully crafted narratives from a command post delivered by designated spokespersons can help dampen inflammatory headlines and help journalists to be more aware of their own implicit biases. Social media is an effective tool for police leaders to address these issues directly without the filter of the media.

It is important for law enforcement leaders to monitor media coverage of the event and social media activity. Police should give an initial statement to meet the needs of the media and set the stage for future information exchange. Law Enforcement should expect to interact with the media with a push towards relaying information to the media that is accurate and timely. This would prevent the need for media to obtain information from sources that may be anti-police. The media needs to trust that agencies will remain accessible. All information should be given at a central location that is accessible to all media outlets. The messages being sent from the law enforcement to the media should be reflective of your agencies mission, vision, and values.

Studies concluded that suggest improved media relations could positively influence the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies. Buhrmaster (2005) provided six tips for improving police and media relations. The suggestions included seeking media exposure, an open door policy, looking good in front of the media, open lines of communication, developing empathy, and actually satisfying the needs of media (Buhrmaster, 2005). Law enforcement must understand that media is a for profit business and news sells. Timely and accurate news sells faster. Law enforcement must understand that the media is going to sell a story regardless of the source of information. Most Americans believe what they receive through the media. Only 20% say they disbelieve much or all of the news delivered by many national news outlets (Pew Research, 1998).

Law enforcement and the media must coexist while meeting the needs of both groups. The key is to develop a strong relationship prior to a critical incident. Both groups need to be educated on the needs, expectations and policies of the other. Most importantly, both sides have to respect each other and effectively communicate with each other.

Role of Leadership

In times of crisis, law enforcement leaders need to use the principles of authentic leadership (Normore, 2018). Their actions must be moral, authentic, and transparent. Ethical leadership behavior builds trust with the community and media. Emotional intelligence is also an important part of interaction between the police and media. Law enforcement leaders must have the emotional intelligence to understand the point of view of the media, community, and to address their concerns and meet their needs. We learned in our effective communication module with Dr. Long about the power of the tongue to

choose words to calm the situation or use them to cause an escalation of tension.

Effective communication is the process where a leader influences others to get others to meet a goal.

Certainly, the relationship between the police and the media has the potential to be adversarial and contentious due to their competing interests. We have looked at the historical events that have created challenges for police and media relations. Law enforcement leaders are challenged to meet the increased expectations and demands of the accelerated news cycle that is driven by 24-hour news. The prevalence of smart phones that are connected to social media has created an accelerated expectation of news via mobile apps and social media. The increased pressures have required police leaders to adopt new strategies to meet these demands.

Emerging Technologies

Emerging technologies are impacting the coverage of police actions. Police duties are evolving and integrating many new technologies into their daily routines. Cell phones, mobile data computers, mobile video systems, and body cameras are the new reality for police officers. Many media outlets have drones to gather different perspectives from scenes. The low cost of obtaining a drone makes them more accessible to media than the costs of a news helicopter. Media reporters are able to source content for their coverage from social media posts. Citizens present at a police incident can post photos, videos, and observations that media outlets can use and then go directly to the poster to contribute to their coverage.

Law enforcement is behind the curve and reactive as we seek to establish and communicate with media. Larger agencies often have dedicated public information

officers and social media staff to put out press releases and social media content. A smaller law enforcement agency may not have the benefit of a dedicated public information officer and the on duty supervisor or chief executive may step into the role of public information officer. A larger agency may have the dedicated public information officer that has established relationships with media and can set up a media briefing location and timeline for communication with media. Leadership must be proactive to cultivate the relationship between their agency and the media.

Personal and Professional Experiences

As leaders in our agencies we can use our professional experiences to proactively identify roles and personnel to fill those roles in the event of a large scale media event. We can be agents of change to help lead our agencies to meet the new media expectations. After the police shooting of Tony Robinson in Madison, Wisconsin on March 6, 2015, the Madison Police Department worked with the Wisconsin Professional Police Association and their legal team to develop a message related to the incident. The media after was handled differently than the Ferguson incident.

In Ferguson, the police did not actively manage their message to the media and had a bad outcome. After the Tony Robinson incident the leadership team developed the message that Madison was different than Ferguson, Missouri. Their message stressed the community engagement and connections the Madison Police Department had with their community, and were reflected in the media coverage of the event. Madison did not see the community protests and destruction of property that occurred in Ferguson due to the relationship between the community and the effective communication with the media that converged on Madison.

Agencies should consider the implementation of tools that can push a message across multiple platforms such as Nixle and Hyper-reach to get their message to citizens and media. The Iowa County Sheriff's Office uses these tools to effectively communicate with citizens and media in emergent and routine communications. Police incidents, road closures, traffic incidents, missing persons, and emergency management communications all can be more effectively shared with these tools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between law enforcement, their communities and the media continues to be a significant issue facing law enforcement leaders. We addressed how media expectations and social media demands impact how American law enforcement carries out their duties and mission.

This relationship has evolved and changed the way law enforcement activity is being reported. We discussed why it is important for law enforcement leaders to effectively communicate their narrative to the media to tell their story and positively impact media coverage. Finally, law enforcement needs to maximize the relationship between police agencies and the media through the use of emerging technologies.

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