

ELIMINATE THE MIDDLEMAN: Telling the Agency's Own Story with SOCIAL MEDIA

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In a culture of cellphone videos and body cameras, the public sees the world through a small lens—the angle of which is historically, dictated by the media. Researchers have often argued that factors like “newsworthiness” norms, limited newsgathering resources, and “copycat propensities” among journalists and publications contribute to the establishment of a single national media agenda.¹

However, people no longer rely solely on newspapers and television news outlets for current event information. From pop culture news like the death of Whitney Houston and the British royal wedding announcement to U.S.-wide or worldwide news like the Hudson River plane crash and the Boston Marathon bombing, news is more and more frequently breaking via social media.² In fact, due to social media's vast audience, immediacy, and accessibility, more than 50 percent of people in the United States have learned of breaking news from social media rather than official news sources. A majority of U.S. adults (62 percent) turn to social media for news, with 18 percent doing so often.³

The emergence of social media as a major news outlet, however, is accompanied by the emergence of a band of citizen journalists who aren't held to the same standard of proof as professional journalists, nor are they as concerned with their journalistic integrity as they are with their personal agendas or the number of likes, comments, and shares their posts receive.

The dangers this trend poses to law enforcement are extreme. Social media's anonymity and encouragement of discussion can engender a type of mob mentality that, paired with law enforcement's intriguing and communal nature, opens the industry

to public attacks on individuals' and agencies' credibility. These attacks are often based on ill-informed personal opinions or quickly spread erroneous information.⁴

Thankfully, social media is as easily accessible to law enforcement as it is to news outlets and the general population.

While 82 percent of local law enforcement agencies effectively utilize social media for investigative purposes, its advantages extend beyond gathering evidence.⁵ Through social media, law enforcement agencies can effectively disseminate urgent, accurate information more quickly than through traditional methods, eradicate media skew and popular erroneous information, and distribute important notifications or promotional material to both broad and targeted audiences, essentially becoming the go-to news source for all agency- or law enforcement-related news.

Advantages of Social Media for Law Enforcement

Disseminate urgent, accurate information more quickly than through traditional methods.

By nature, law enforcement news is often urgent. Alerting people to traffic crashes to avoid, calling for their assistance in locating a missing person, or cautioning them that a dangerous criminal is in their area is information that simply cannot be delayed.

However, traditionally, when something of importance occurs, law enforcement public information officers gather the pertinent, shareable facts and disseminate them to the news media via press releases or press conferences. By the time media members sift through the information for “newsy” tidbits and capture supplemental video

footage, photographs, and other materials, hours might have passed with the average citizen remaining completely oblivious. Today, law enforcement agencies can cut out the middleman by using social media, thus decreasing the time lapse between an event and the public's awareness of it. Getting the word out in an emergency is considered one of the most beneficial uses of maintaining a law enforcement agency Facebook or Twitter page.⁶

Live-tweeting on Twitter is a quick, efficient method for distributing pertinent, timely facts without excessive detail or an unnecessary news angle. Some instances require only a single notification and follow-up tweet: “Northbound Main St. closed due to an accident at 1st St.” “Main St. re-opened.” Likewise, agencies can tweet during more elaborate cases at each stage of a public information officer's involvement, from the moment he or she receives notice of an incident, to facts, locations, causes of public concern, and the final case closure as the information trickles in. Not only does this accomplish officers' promise to protect and serve with efficient warning of potential danger, but it also demonstrates transparency to the public and empowers citizens to be involved in the crime-fighting process.⁷

When a situation calls for more than a few 140-character text updates, live-streaming applications, like Facebook Live and Periscope for Twitter, allow any agency member with a smartphone, tablet, or webcam to broadcast full press conferences in real time—allowing community members to receive the information as directly as news organizations do. The applications enable press conferences to become more interactive, allowing viewers to share their reactions and comments and ask questions, to



Global Social Network Users: 2010–2020

Source: Statista, "Number of social network users worldwide from 2010 to 2020," <http://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users> (accessed August 11, 2016).

which agencies can respond and monitor to learn the type of information the community desires and ensure even faster answers in future similar instances.

Eradicate media skew and popular erroneous information.

Whether through unintentional bias, hasty misinformation, or purposeful self-serving material skew, the voice of truth in a given situation is often so quiet that it needs social media's megaphone to be heard.

Because the pressure to keep up with the immediacy of social media can result in less fact-checking and more errors, 49.1 percent of people have heard breaking news on social media that turned out to be false.⁸

However, by joining the conversation through social media, law enforcement agencies can combat misconceptions, fallacies, or rumors relying on nothing more than the strength of their Wi-Fi.

Despite the inundation of information coming from sources of all kinds, tweets from official accounts, such as governmental agencies, can slow the spread of rumors on Twitter and correct misinformation, regardless of how many times it has been tweeted and retweeted.⁹

Law enforcement can also use Facebook and Twitter to tell the full story when a misconception is less the result of an over-eagerness to inform than a desire to contrive an intriguing news angle that will hook the media's audience.

After multiple such instances in Duval County, Florida, Jacksonville Sheriff's Office public information officers started to monitor local news outlets' social media posts for false information about the agency or its cases. When they detect a falsehood, they comment on the post with a correction, so

the same people who saw the inaccuracy now have access to the correction.¹⁰

Instead of correction on another entity's social media profile, agencies can eradicate rumors by driving users to their own page by utilizing the previously discussed Facebook Live and Periscope on Twitter to livestream press conferences. This ensures the public is provided the same, complete account that members of the media receive, and they can refer back to it as necessary to clear up any confusion.

In April 2016, the Pinellas County, Florida, Sheriff's Office was trending on Facebook—the network abuzz with outraged posts linking to various news reports regarding three juveniles who had stolen a vehicle and, while fleeing from deputies, accidentally drove it into a murky, un navigable pond, where they drowned.¹¹

Despite being told that responding deputies had entered the water in an attempt to rescue the juveniles and receiving dash camera footage proving so, media outlets shared only the footage of deputies on the perimeter, perpetuating the, albeit "newsy," falsehood that the deputies had made no attempt to rescue the drowning juveniles.

In response, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office public information officers posted on Facebook and Twitter the footage of deputies stripped down to wet undershirts and carrying their boots that the media neglected to share, along with a clip of Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri's passionate defense of his deputies and reprimand of the media for irresponsible reporting, which spontaneously took place during the Facebook Live recording of an unrelated press conference.¹²

The shift was immediate. The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office continued to trend

on Facebook through the next few days, but instead of anger and disdain, posts expressed gratitude for the full story, appreciation for the sheriff's loyalty to his deputies, and even some apologies from users who had jumped to false conclusions at the media's original account.

Distribute important notifications or promotional materials to both broad and targeted audiences.

With approximately 2 billion Internet users on social networks worldwide as of April 2016—1.59 billion active monthly users on Facebook and 320 million users on Twitter alone—with the right strategy, the information law enforcement agencies post has the potential to transcend the geographical, political, and economic borders that hinder traditional media outlets.¹³

Likewise, social media reaches the younger generation that television news and print publications continuously struggle to reach. Only 39 percent of respondents in a 2015 Media Insight Project survey of 1,046 Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 said they actively seek out news. However, 60 percent of respondents said they "bump into" that type of content as they do other things on Facebook and other websites.¹⁴

The key is to know how to "bump into" more users, which is where collaboration, targeting, and advertisement come into play. A law enforcement agency can enable its content to reach social media users outside of those who follow its agency account by tapping into audiences of its collaborators—fellow law enforcement agencies, community partners, news organizations, and so forth.

By tagging the co-sponsoring organization or the venue of an event an agency

wants to promote through social media postings on Facebook, the post reaches not only the agency's followers, but also the tagged entity's followers. Instead of generating a new Facebook post, law enforcement agencies can also recycle collaborators' content by sharing it on their own pages. Similarly, law enforcement can tweet about or @mention collaborators and "like" or retweet their posts for greater social reach. Whether the post is an important story published by a local news organization or a flier for a cosponsored event, sharing and tagging are surefire ways to increase the size and breadth of the audience.

Although tapping into collaborators' audiences through tagging and sharing can reach users outside of an agency's following, the actual number of Facebook or Twitter users to whom posts are served is based on various social media algorithms that take into consideration factors like relevance in lieu of simple chronology.¹⁵

Although the intricacies of each social media algorithm are constantly changing, the level of engagement—likes, reactions, comments, and shares on Facebook; retweets and likes on Twitter—and the performance of a post or tweet among users who have already viewed it, contribute to the post's "relevance."¹⁶

Thus, when law enforcement agencies utilize social media pages for self- or event-promotion purposes, it is important that posts are geared toward reaching not only large audiences, but also pertinent audiences.

On Facebook, this can be achieved through targeted posts. Without a charge, users can select the followers to whom they want their posts served based on their age range, gender, location, language, and "interests," meaning "people who have expressed an interest in or like pages related to" customizable topics.¹⁷ Topics can be individually entered or selected from a list that includes broad options like entertainment, sports and outdoors, technology, and others, which are also broken down into subcategories.

For example, law enforcement agencies can select ages 50 and older to receive a post about an upcoming elderly scam awareness seminar; people who live in specific cities affected by a new ordinance; or people who have expressed an interest in "running," "races," "5Ks," and so on for an agency-sponsored race.

Not only do these publicity options reach a more focused audience at no cost, they also are significantly less expensive than traditional television commercials and print advertisement slots.

However, as social media's influence has increased, agencies may choose to allocate part of their advertising budgets to paid advertisements on Facebook or Twitter. In fact, spending on digital advertising, including social media marketing, is expected to surpass television ad spending for the first time in 2017.¹⁸

Whether the information is intended for event promotion, a seasonal public service announcement video, or a new crime tip hotline, Facebook and Twitter both offer paid advertising options that can more assuredly target certain audiences than traditional paid advertising through radio, television, and print newspapers or magazines.

In summary, when harnessed and strategically implemented, the same rapidity and accessibility that make social media such a dangerous public relations liability also make it an invaluable law enforcement tool.

By eliminating the need for a media outlet to serve as a middleman in disseminating vital information—be it for public or personal benefit—social media has effectively shifted public information officers' voices from the background to the foreground. Active participation in the social networking sphere is not only an additional public service, dispersing important information, safety messages, and cautionary alerts, but it is also a necessity for law enforcement agencies to remain part of the community's conversation, communicating in a shared language, and patrolling it as they do the streets. ♦

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Notes:

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