

What Part of YouTube Don't You Understand?
Seizing Opportunities in the Age of Social Networking and Video Sharing

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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Seeing is believing. According to YouTube, 20 hours of video is uploaded to their website every minute to be shared with the world via the Internet (YouTube, n.d.). Consider that President Obama's "channel" on YouTube has been viewed almost 23 million times since September of 2006. 184,705 individuals have subscribed to the channel so they are notified when new content is put on it; and the 1900 videos posted have been viewed a combined 146 million times (Barackobamadotcom, n.d.).

Some might consider YouTube a remake of "America's Funniest Home Videos" TV programming. In fact, it has become a mainstream broadcast medium, reaching millions of viewers. They choose not only the content they wish to see, but when they view it as well. This trend is not merely a shift in content or editorial control; it is a completely new paradigm. News consumers are part of the news process now (Pew Research, 2010). These trends create an interesting fact: video-sharing and social networking channels may become the police agency's best friend.

The Police Blotter

The police blotter, the record of arrests and incidents, is always in the news in some manner. The media is drawn to the action, and the public has a vested interest in the activities of its police department. Similarly, the police have a vested interest in the concerns of the public because the ability to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of their actions (Magnacarta Plus, n.d.). In the emerging norms of instant news, user-generated content and independent posting of “reality” policing agencies have a significant new opportunity.

Police patrol video systems now being tested in the streets can provide unbiased accounts of police activities. Social networking platforms such as Facebook and video sharing platforms such as Youtube can provide a means for the police to distribute important information and receive timely feedback from the communities they serve. Sustaining this kind of accountability and transparency through the dissemination of real-time police activities can be the foundation from which the next generation of public trust will be built.

Searchable and Sociable

The evolution of social networking and sites is occurring at a dizzying pace. A meaningful indicator of current trends is an industry report that as of March of 2010, Facebook had surpassed Google for most visits to a homepage (Nuttall and

Gelles, 2010). Law enforcement should recognize social networking sites can be a valuable tool; and yet they are only tools and not a panacea for agencies that have strained public relations. The converse of the value of social networking and video sharing sites is that they are used to post stories and videos showing alleged police misconduct and brutality.

As an example, a recent YouTube search on the term “police brutality” yielded about 14,000 hits (YouTube, n.d.). The reader can easily see that social networking and social media hold great promise as a tool to enhance and convey law enforcement’s mission and processes if managed effectively. The alternative is to allow others to post and frame similar videos, inevitably resulting in agencies responding only as a defense mechanism.

Custom news

The Internet has redefined not only what news is, but more importantly, how the public accesses what it considers news. A 2010 Pew Research Center survey (2010) summarized the relationship that people have with the news in this new multi-platform media environment as “becoming portable, personalized, and participatory.” Today, 33% of cell phone owners access news on their cell phones; 28% have customized their home page to reflect their news interests. Most significantly, 37% of Internet users have contributed to the creation of news,

commented about it or disseminated it via postings on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

These findings place a premium on timely, accurate, and useful information or news. The logical approach for a police agency to access this segment of the public is to utilize contemporary Internet medium on a cycle that keeps pace with the public's appetite for information. Some might argue that the police are not responsible to create their own news. That argument would fit the old news paradigm of professional journalist gathering newsworthy information, making editorial decisions, and broadcasting it via television or print publications. The digital age is redefining what is newsworthy. News recipients are increasingly shaping what is newsworthy rather than the news broadcasters. To broadly access the public in this new paradigm, it is necessary to explore the broad spectrum of current communication platforms.

Connected via Internet

Access to police services, other than personal contact, was traditionally made via telephone through an operator. The advent of 911 in the late 1960's enabled a faster connection without charge to the calling party; and, by 1980, provided calling number and location information to aid in emergency responses.

More recently, communication to police agencies is now likely to include phone, email, Internet-based servers for reporting, and text messaging.

The San Francisco Police Department's website, for example, allows victims of auto burglaries to report their incidents online on the department's web server (SFPD Report, n.d.). Anonymous tips can be sent to the Department via text messaging, either from a phone or computer, and are subsequently routed to the appropriate unit for investigation. With the growth of Internet-based electronic communications, there is a plethora of opportunities for law enforcement agencies to establish and maintain efficient lines of communication with the public they serve. This can be accomplished with direct publication services such as Nixle (Municipal Wire, n.d.), websites with information posted in various forms, or more recently, social networking sites. An example of this would be the San Francisco Police Department's Facebook page (Facebook SFPD, n.d.).

SFPD@facebook.com

A visitor to the Department's Facebook page will see the lines of communication for the agency are truly two way and transparent, as the posts can be read by anyone using Facebook. A variety of information can be posted and discussed on the Department's page. At present, SFPD posts press releases, community meeting notices, wanted suspects and endangered missing persons.

Reports of outstanding police work are also posted. The public can post comments and make inquiries, and these queries receive a reply in the open forum, thus reaching whoever may have the same question or concern.

Since Facebook has more than 50 million users nationally in all demographic groups, it has great potential to sustain interaction with the public. Additionally, video content can be linked to YouTube from a Facebook page, so the mechanism to distribute video content is already in place. So how can law enforcement agencies take full advantage of this environment, and what outcomes could be expected?

Purpose Driven Technology

Police agencies that use social networking sites for the dissemination of information to the public are essentially using the sites as an alternative to traditional media releases of information. The multimedia capability inherent in Internet-based platforms presents a wide range of options for information releases. The advantage is that the information is directly posted, and the content as well as context is defined by the agency. While this results in significant control over content, the agency's perception of public interest inevitably impacts what information is eventually released. Understanding the external environment, as well as trends in information networking, are essential to exploiting multimedia

information platforms such as Facebook. Understanding how to use and distribute real-time video to the public is another essential tool of the modern police agency.

Exponential advances in digital video technology make it increasingly likely that police activities are recorded in some fashion. One indicator is that by 2007, consumers in the United States reached 100% saturation of cell phones. This means the number of active cell phones, most with video capability, essentially equals the total population (Knight, 2007). Furthermore, the cost of video cameras continues to drop as capabilities increase, a trend in technology that Gordon E. Moore forecast 45 years ago (Moore, 1965).

What is considered outrageously expensive today will soon be a common commodity. Consider that in 1986 the ancestor to the modern digital camera was a still video camera from Canon that cost approximately \$3000 (Canon RC701, 1986). Today, nearly every mobile phone has such capabilities included, usually at no additional cost. The ease with which these videos are captured and shared via social media translates to the sheer numbers of police-related videos on Youtube, many of which were obviously captured with cell phone cameras.

Police videos, whether positive or negative, are an element of our culture. One need look no further than the TV show COPS, which has been on the air for more than 21 years. The public clearly has an interest in even the “routine” of

police work. Interestingly, the police themselves could become the largest purveyors of police-related content on the web.

Police Videos

The use of video recording by patrol officers is widely accepted by the general public as a means to ensure the integrity of the officer's actions (Rosenblatt, Cromartie, Firman, Baker, Fergus, & Wang, 2004). Transparent accountability afforded by the use of patrol videos does have some degree of liability. With the expanded use of patrol video cameras comes the increased possibility that misconduct will be recorded (and possibly released to the public). While misconduct is undesirable, being capable of recording it is necessary collateral to assure the public that the agency is committed to accountability.

A 2004 IACP study on the impact of video evidence (2004) included public opinion surveys which demonstrated some of the positive impacts of patrol video. Of the respondents, 48% indicated they were less likely to file a complaint against the officer if a video camera was present. When complaints were investigated, the results were that 93% of the officers were exonerated when video evidence existed.ⁱ The results of the study provided data demonstrating the use of patrol video cameras was viewed positively both internally and externally. Advances in

video capture technologies may next mean that almost every action of an officer can be captured; the agency would then want to choose which to post.

The latest trend in police patrol video recording is the wearable or point of view camera. The San Jose CA Police Department recently became one of the first agencies in the country to begin testing wearable point of view cameras as part of a one-year pilot program in cooperation with Taser International. Taser is the maker of the Axon wearable camera, which loosely resembles a Bluetooth earpiece. Chief Rob Davis compares the emerging video technology to the advent of other law enforcement technologies such as the patrol car, the two-way radio, and the 911 system (Mercury News, 2009). Products such as the Axon will increase the source of video material that an agency can potentially use to inform the public of police actions. Certainly, policy will have to be developed, but being able to disseminate unfiltered content to the public may be a significant advantage over waiting for the next news cycle, or worse yet, the unedited video from a bystander. The greatest constraint may be the fiscal health of agencies, which could preclude taking advantage of progressive programs to enhance their transparency to the community.

Planning during a recession

Due to the current recession, police budgets are unlikely to include major capital expenditures that are not essential. Sources of funding may exist, though, for the purchase of advanced technology through grants. The data from the San Jose pilot program will be useful because San Jose is a relatively large agency (1300 sworn). Their outcomes, and those of other agencies, that are exploring the social networking realm cannot yet be measured, but it is hard to imagine that this is not a cost effective tool.

Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Nixle, etc, can be managed for the cost of the personnel used to oversee the accounts. In addition to developing strategies to present data, information and video content, trends in social networking sites should also be studied and assessed for use by the agency. Agencies can network amongst themselves to formulate best practices and gather cost benefit analysis. What the benefits of using social networking sites will ultimately be is not known. Trends in news media suggest that mobile news on demand will continue to grow. Tapping into this information network is the prudent move to make while being mindful of the sensitivity of information.

Conclusion

The utilization of advanced patrol video systems will prove valuable as a resource for training and management. They may have their greatest value, though, as a tool to enhance public trust. The commitment to emphasize the way we deliver police services, combined with recognized measurement tools such as CompStat and similar crime mapping and statistical data bases has the potential to strengthen the partnership between the police and the public. Social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube represent tremendous opportunities to disseminate this information to an increasingly large segment of the population.

The recent emergence of law enforcement agencies on Facebook is indicative of the recognition of such opportunities. It cannot be ignored that the current economic downturn is far from over and police budgets are deeply affected in terms of making capital expenditures. This is precisely why agencies should engage in strategic planning for the future. The cost is relatively low to research trends in technology and formulate strategies for implementation; yet the potential for making informed and purposeful decisions when funding is available will result in the efficient use of limited resources in a way that will not only make us the newsmakers, but distributors of the news itself.

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