

**INTERACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA:  
SHOULD MY DEPARTMENT BE INVOLVED?**

**by**

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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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**INTERACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA: SHOULD MY DEPARTMENT BE INVOLVED?**

Why should you, the police administrator, be concerned about interactive social media? Isn't Facebook just for kids? This could not be further from the truth. And unless you are willing to get on board, you may be holding your agency back, and missing out on valuable information from members of your community. The increase in the use of real time interactive social media in the last five years has dramatically changed the manner in which many in your community live their lives. People use their smart phones to let others know their location, tell friends what they're doing and post photos in real time. If law enforcement were to fully engage the segment of society using real time interactive social media, how could it benefit both your department and your community? What if law enforcement could enhance collaboration with the community through interactive social media, which could, in turn, enhance our crime fighting ability? Imagine a scenario in which an agency's involvement in social media could actually solve a crime...

In this scenario, a robbery occurs at a local business. When the robbery occurs, the police department immediately sends out a Twitter announcement notifying subscribers of the crime and asking them to be on the lookout for the suspects. Intelligence analysts begin checking other social media sites for subscribers who may have "checked in" near the crime. They find several people have checked in at businesses in the area using Facebook, Yelp and Four Square. Analysts send text messages to these people, who are immediately on the lookout for the suspects. Several quickly report suspicious activity and take pictures of a vehicle fleeing the scene, uploading them to the Department's Facebook page. Analysts broadcast descriptions of the vehicle to responding officers, and the vehicle is located leaving the mall. The suspects are arrested

with stolen property from the robbery within minutes of the crime.

Does this example sound far-fetched? Through interactive social media, department members and citizens can work together to solve crime. While this is a fictional scenario, it is quite plausible, and shows that with well planned implementation, the use of real time, interactive social media can have a positive impact on community issues.

### **IS SOCIAL MEDIA BEING USED NOW?**

Agencies have become increasingly involved in social media, using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Nixle to push information out to their communities. A benefit to this medium is that it has given agencies the ability to send information to community members in addition to traditional reliance on another entity, such as the press, to get their message relayed. Departments use these sites to let the public know about department activities, as well as on-going investigations, with which the public may be of assistance. According to Frank Demizio of the Philadelphia Police Department (2012):

In the summer of 2010, the official Philadelphia Police Department Facebook page was launched. Currently, there are over 38,000 people following this page, which makes it the most followed Facebook page of any law enforcement agency in the nation. The Department links all articles from the “News” section of its web site, Phillypolice.com, to its Facebook page to ensure that information is immediately available to the public, independent of the news media (Domizio, 2012, par. 3).

While this level of involvement in social media is a positive step, many agencies are not

yet taking advantage of the real time interactive capabilities of the medium to give members of the community the opportunity to share information of interest to the police.

The younger generation use social media as their primary means of communication. This sentiment is supported in Spivey's (2011) article, *Central Jersey Police Using Social Media to Keep Public Informed*. While discussing his department's use of Twitter, Hillsborough New Jersey Police Chief Paul Kaminski said: "This is the way our society is now, especially with our younger generation...They want immediate notification" (par.4). In an article in the Cape Cod Times, Jeffery (2011) noted that 48% of people 12 years or older have profiles on social networking sites. This number includes 51% of Americans age 35 to 44 years old, double the number from just two years earlier. Jeffery continued that the use of social networking sites, such as Twitter, allow departments to immediately disseminate information to the public (par.9). With nearly half of the teenage and adult population participating in social media, it is clear that the percentage of participants will continue to grow.

By failing to accept information from this segment of the population using interactive social media, law enforcement is essentially telling them the information they have is unimportant or unnecessary. The police should develop plans to implement the use of real time, interactive social media within their communities. Read on, and you will see where we have come from, how some agencies are putting social media to use, and what it could lead to in the future for your agency and community.

## **THE PAST**

Soon after the beginning of the modern era of policing in the 1820's, citizens and police realized it was important to develop a method to communicate with each other.

Cross (2011) wrote, “Appropriate conduct for constables was laid down in a detailed book of instructions published in 1840 and issued to all new constables.” This book of instructions advised constables to warn people in a loud voice in case of emergencies. Night watchmen were instructed to “...grow a beard that will cover his throat to keep his air tubes warm...” thus allowing him to alert the public of problems (par. 6).

As technology progressed, the means of law enforcement communications followed suit. The first real breakthrough in police communications came with the invention of the telephone. According to the Police Box History web site (unknown date), near the end of the nineteenth century, police call boxes began being used in the United States. Soon after their invention, “police telephone boxes and posts soon populated the routes walked by US law enforcers in every state in the union” (par. 1). These boxes were used by officers walking a beat to communicate with the station, but were also be used by citizens to call for help. The call boxes were phased out in the 1960s as the number of police radios increased. Most persons also had telephones in their homes, and this became the primary method of communication between the public and the police.

The telephone is still the predominant way members of the public contacts law enforcement, even as dramatic advances in technology have left some law enforcement agencies behind. The social media movement began growing substantially when Facebook was made available to the general public in 2006. (Nickson, 2009, par.15). Since that time, social media has changed the way that a large percentage of society communicates. This results in a reality where policing is stuck in an era where the telephone is the primary means by which information is received while their populace has migrated to an alternate means of communications altogether. During a personal

interview with Sara Diaz, the Information Services Manager for the City of El Cajon, she expressed concerns that this gap could conceivably deter some from passing on valuable information to the police. Diaz, who previously worked as the City of San Diego's Emerging Technologies Manager, said it is important to understand that those in society who expect immediate communication don't want to wait longer than 20 seconds to relay a message. She said that rather than waiting on hold when calling law enforcement, these people may choose to hang up and go about their lives.

Law enforcement agencies promote working with the community, but some are hesitant to move into the realm of social media. Some hesitation may be based on the fact that interactive social media is different than current or previous forms of communication. Many in government are content to do things as they have been done in the past because those methods are tested and comfortable. This alludes to the old phrase "good enough for government work," which is defined as, "sufficiently close; done just well enough...not done with care or pride." (thefreedictionary.com). To effectively serve the public, there are times that law enforcement administrators need to be innovative and willing to work outside their comfort zone. Law enforcement agencies have the opportunity to connect with members of their communities in a way never before possible, and the time is now to catch up with society.

## **THE PRESENT**

Most departments have taken advantage of the Internet as a means of distributing information to the public. Many have established department web sites, online reporting, and some are currently using Facebook; most commonly as a type of community billboard to notify their community of department activities and programs. Even with

these uses, there is still a gap when it comes to accepting real time information from the public via social media. The fact that some agencies are content to use the telephone for almost all communications (the same basic method used to communicate for more than 100 years) is a problem.

It should be obvious that the computer age is upon us, and will not be going away. Some in our communities are comfortable with this, while others have had great difficulty adapting to this new era. In his article, *The Three Different Types of Digital Residents*, Gilkey (2008), explains this dilemma by analogizing three different types of people, living on two different continents: the digital continent, and the analog continent. He describes the younger generation, those under 25-years-old, as digital natives, living on the digital continent. These people have known no other technical world than the one in which they now live. He describes those who are older than 25 as digital transients and digital immigrants, from the analog continent. The digital transients visit the digital world only when necessary, while the digital immigrants have adapted to the technological changes. Law enforcement administrators must understand that much of society is made up of the digital natives and immigrants. By refusing to accept digital information via social media, law enforcement is missing out on valuable information. This may include important information ranging from tips on crimes that have occurred to crime trends in neighborhood.

According to Gilkey (2008), “It’s critical to understand that the American way of life is always moving towards the digital continent away from the analog continent” (par. 4). Agencies requiring people to make a telephone call when they have important information to relay have not considered the needs and norms of the increasing digital

native population in their midst. While a digital transient would be perfectly comfortable making a telephone call, and possibly waiting on hold, the digital native would not because they are accustomed to immediate communication. Based on Gilkey's theory, it is plausible to conclude that instead of going through this "foreign" process, the younger generation may choose to not make the call at all.

Rather than alienating a growing segment of society, law enforcement could make a decision to embrace the digital age, and move forward by fully using the interactive capabilities of social media. There are some who say that by embracing interactive social media, agencies could actually get back to the basics of policing.

### **THE FUTURE**

The days have long passed since cops regularly walked the beat, tipping their hats to local shopkeepers and chatting up residents on street corners... new technology expands the definition of community, and social media can become the 21st-century version of the cop on the corner (Jeffery, 2011, par. 1-2). Law enforcement officials should solicit input from the public to examine how participation in social media would be viewed by members of their community. Which social media sites do your stakeholders use, and which ones would be the most beneficial?

Ali (2010) discusses the importance of government agencies using available technology to communicate with members of society in a manner to which they have become accustomed. For government agencies, social media not only sends and gathers information instantaneously — it fosters relationships and trust, while encouraging users to share important information...agency engagement with these platforms can help show people that government organizations are listening (par. 20).

The founder of SMILE (Social Media in Law Enforcement), says “we are in the very, very early stages” of social media use by law enforcement agencies (Cohen, 2010, par. 2). This sentiment is supported in Spivey’s (2011) article, *Central Jersey Police Using Social Media to Keep Public Informed*. He quotes an International Association of Chiefs of Police official who said “social media is not a fad, and it will continue to evolve” (par. 10).

The concept of having a “virtual cop on the corner” is one that could easily be put into action. Some social media sites allow users to “check-in” at various locations, to let others know where they are. This feature could be used by law enforcement officers to advise members of the community of their location to meet and discuss issues. The virtual world could also be used to engage members of the community in other ways. Police officials could hold virtual forums via Skype or Facebook to discuss issues facing the community. The public would be able to receive the important information, ask questions of government officials and hear concerns from other members of the community. These forums would be the same as any other traditional community meeting, but community members could participate from the comfort of their own homes. The implementation of virtual forums could increase interaction between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. Through this increased interaction, departments could learn of community concerns that would not otherwise be revealed.

An expert panel was convened in August of 2011 to discuss this issue. Several futures scenarios were discussed related to social media. One potential future event identified by members of the group was the elimination of traditional media. As the

popularity of social media has increased, the numbers of bloggers and other “grass roots” media have also increased. Traditionally, law enforcement agencies have used the press to distribute information to the public. Through the use of social media, law enforcement agencies have the ability to cut out the middle-man and speak directly to the members of the community. The concern of news reporters selecting which portion of a press release to use, or adding commentary, would be gone. Law enforcement personnel could even host daily web briefings to inform members of the public as to the events of the day. Picture if you will, citizens having the ability to log on to their computers to see the chief of police or watch commander telling them about what has happened during the previous 24 hours. In this future, department members report the news. Information could be shared on significant calls for service, wanted suspects, or information being sought for investigations. There is no limit to the information that could be covered in these briefings. A recent example illustrates the ease with which an agency could capitalize on the potential of interactive media for public safety.

In an article in New Jersey’s Courier News, one of the first agencies to use Twitter was the New Jersey State Police. Access to the Twitter account was originally given only to the press. According to the article, soon after the implementation of the Twitter account, the state police director of communications came to realize the information being distributed was public information, and that it made sense to allow access to the public. The New Jersey State Police now has 6,500 followers, which include both members of the press and members of the public. Followers now get information quickly and directly from the state police without having it filtered by the press (Spivey, 2011, par.12). The state police official said: “There’s obviously a public safety benefit to

asking for public input, whether it's an Amber Alert ... [or information on] a car involved in a hit-and-run" (Spivey, 2011, par.12).

Law enforcement's use of interactive social media is effective. The Philadelphia Police Department is a leader in the movement, with involvement on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Philadelphia uses these sites to gather information from the public to help close cases. Since the launch of the Philadelphia Police Department's YouTube site in 2010: "There have been more than 1 million hits to the Department's YouTube channel which have resulted in an unprecedented 25% clearance rate..." (Domizio, 2012, par. 4). It is time that law enforcement agencies understand the value of social media, and the importance of getting involved. "It would be negligent for the police not to make use of this avenue to reach the people that we are empowered to serve" (Domizio, 2012, par. 5).

## **CONCLUSION**

So where will a social media program fit into your organization? Based on the 24-hour ability to monitor social media, some agencies have chosen to have communications center personnel monitor the sites. Because of the public information aspect of social media, some agencies have assigned the responsibility to the public information officer, while others have given the responsibility to watch commanders. Departments will of course need to assess their organizations to see where a social media program will best fit into their structure. In the days of ever-shrinking budgets, a positive aspect of involvement in interactive social media is the cost. While there will always be staffing costs, participation in social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter is free. Utilization of this type of communication will help engage members of the community who may not otherwise feel comfortable interacting with law enforcement, and in turn

build public trust and improve relationships with the community.

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